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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY ANNUAL

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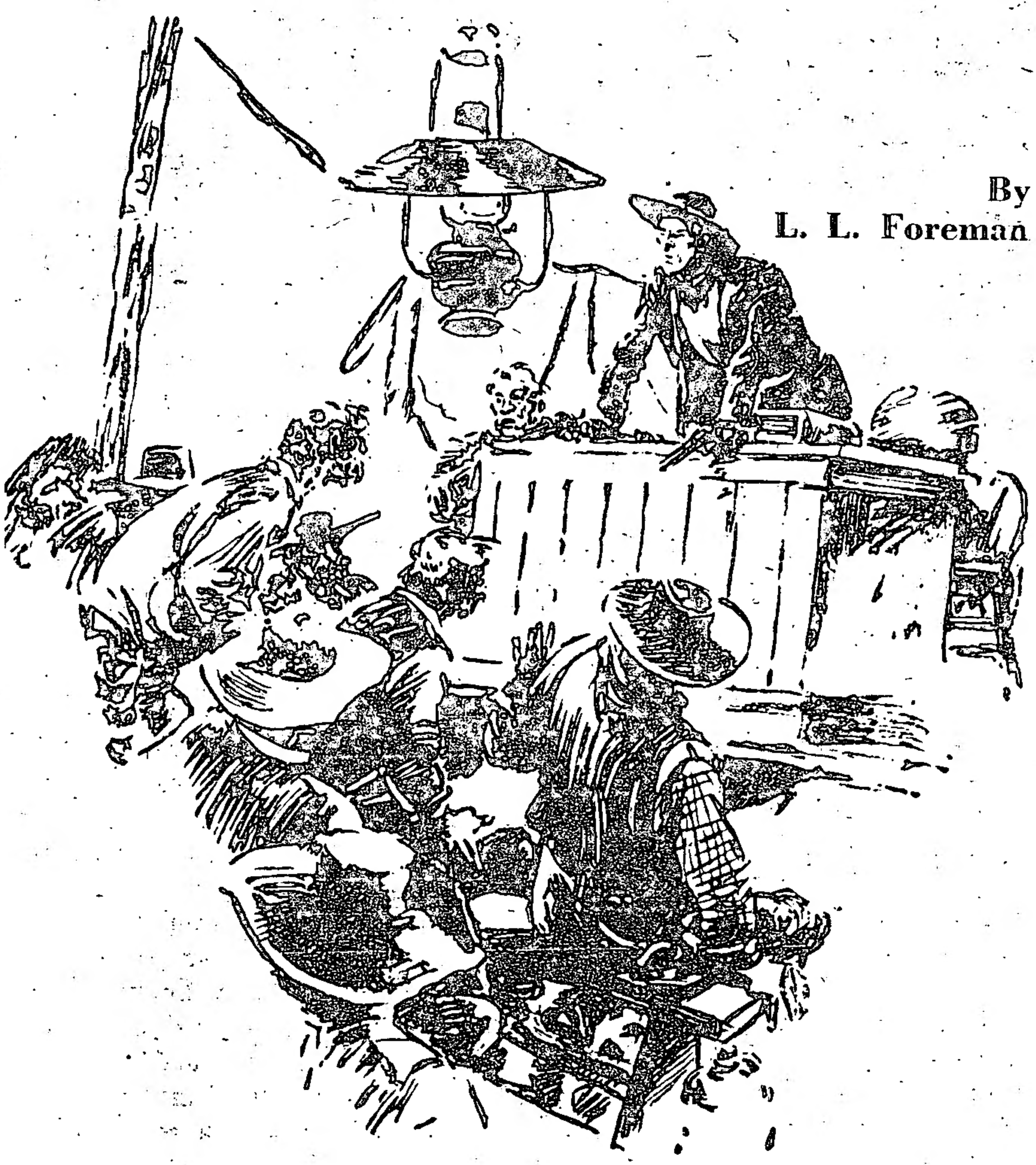
SIX-GUN SERMON

By
L. L. Foreman



If Preacher Devlin's hot-lead homily bore fruit, those boom-town gunnies would be on a Boothill waiting list

I

THE Brindle Kid was in his glory. He stood before the Concordia Saloon on Rainbow's main street, hands on his hips and hat cuffed to the back of his sleek yellow head, a young gun grandee of perky pride for all the town to see.

"We sure got him—Stamp an' Blackfoot an' me!" he crowed.

He wagged a finger at a magnificent black horse tied to the Concordia hitch-rack. The animal was dusty from recent travel. "Brothers, I'm here to tell you he'll never ride that beaut again!"

The Concordia crowd listened attentively. Many of the listeners were connoisseurs of violence. Being such, they had critical skepticism for those who talked too much. But in this case the deed went with the word, and they knew it. The Brindle Kid was no false alarm, for all his flash and brag. His darting young eyes, shallow as mirrors, could go bright with laughter while he pulled the trigger on a man too slow or unprepared to shade him. His face, with its pockmarks, pointed chin and big ears, was a caricature of youth. He was the product of a tough and varied environment that had burned into him a viperish sense of humor. A gun butt was his calculus in simple arithmetic, and he stood high in the service of Stampede Solary, a discriminating picker of useful hirelings.

"We was toughin' it through that sand storm this mornin', comin' back from Aguila, when we saw him," said the Brindle Kid and continued his bragging story.

Meantime, the town of Rainbow went on about its business. Once, not so long ago, it had been a cow town, comfortably shabby, but prosperity had come like an explosion and changed all that. Placer gold had been discovered along Contention Creek, and nowadays the noisy racket of Stampede Solary's big power-driven concentrator thundered every day. Familiar landmarks of the town were lost in an ugly jumble of new buildings, and there was a constant influx of men whose presence would never have been tolerated in Rainbow a year ago. It was the old story of law and order in retreat before the mushroom boom of gold.

Across the street, Marshal Alec Bourne—Old Alec—spoke to his son. "What's that sin-sotted pack been up to now?" The marshal had grown old in his job, and embittered during the past year. To see his quiet town turned into a roaring hell camp by outsiders had hit him hard.

"Another killing, far's I can make out," answered young Alec Bourne. He gave a savage yank to his hat brim. "Make me your deputy, dad, and let me go after Solary! He's robbed us, taken over the town and smashed every law, and laughs at us for trying to stop him!"

Old Alec turned a sour face to his son. "I wish," he stated, "you'd get that off your mind! I've told you, time an' again, it'd mean buck-

in' that whole crowd. How in thunder could *you* do it? Think you're a better man than me?"

Young Alec said no more, but it seemed to him that his father could be the most mule-headed man he knew. Sometimes he suspected that it was a matter of stubborn pride, a refusal on the part of Old Alec to admit himself an impotent and frustrated failure.

The Brindle Kid got to the point of his story. "Brothers, we all three had a grudge against that big hell buster! Me an' Blackfoot, we got the rough side of him once, down in San Rafe two years ago. An' he'd pulled some works on Stamp, one time in Tombstone. Ain't I right, Stamp?"

Stampede Solary nodded. He stood by the doors of the Concordia, which he owned—a pale man with a bony forehead and keen, narrow, intelligent face. He was secretly amused at the Kid, but he carefully kept any look of contempt out of his eyes. "That's right, Kid," he murmured. "We scorched the devil himself, this trip."

Blackfoot Roen, silent and morose, merely looked on with leaden, half-shut eyes. It was known that he had once been caught and scalped by Blackfoot Indians while stealing their horses, but had recovered and escaped to live with a perpetual headache. He was never seen without a hat or with a smile.

"He was ridin' along a canyon rim," explained the Kid to the crowd. "Lookin' for a way down out o' the storm, I reckon. Didn't even see us. We sure showed him a quick way down!" He laughed aloud like a boy at a joke. "When I got off my shot, he just fell out o' his saddle an' down the canyon, slam through the brush! There wasn't no way to climb down after him along there, an' the storm was fierce, so we caught his horse an' came on home. Soon's this ol' windy season's past, I'm goin' on a hunt for his carcass. He's got heavy bounty on him these days, an' with a ring-tailed catawampus like him you're doin' mighty good to get him any ol' way, front or back!"

He teetered on his high heels, proud as a painted brave with a parfleche full of new scalps. "If we didn't finish him, he can't get far, nohow. That ol' Harina Desert, she's a death trap for any man afoot!"

Westward in the far distance from the tree-belted Mogollons, the high ranges ceased and the land swept downward to the blasting, mirage-haunted Harina Desert. Mexicans had it figured out that the unholy basin had been given to Satan to play with, in an attempt to keep him out of mischief. In line with his taste for a particular kind of awful beauty, Old Nick had filled it full of sand, heat, black saw-toothed ridges, and jagged red pinnacles. But after he'd had his fun, he used it for his private reservoir of somber destruction, drawing from it whenever he ran short of material elsewhere. The blinding seasonal sand storms marked the yearly visit

of *El Diablo* spooning out fresh supplies from the inexhaustible reserves of the Harina.

In between the sand storms there was silence so dead and complete that it ached the ear. And then it was that the endless mirage took on voice as well as vision, luring the lost traveler to gibbering insanity in his vain quest of the unseen multitude calling him to cool cloisters of green trees and shady streams.

The man who dragged himself slowly up the long basalt ridge was hearing those voices, but his tenacious mind rejected them, refusing to trade harsh reality for beguiling fancies.

"Blood ringing in my ears."

Although it hurt his parched throat and cracked his lips to talk, he muttered it as a spoken fact which he could remember and cling to later as things got worse with him. He was in a desperately bad way, but he would retain sanity to the end. The night had been long and intolerable. He had tramped steadily through the cool darkness, making as much time as he could, merciless to bruised muscles that cried out for rest and ease, refusing to admit himself beaten by disaster. Morning had found him staggering to the foot of this ridge. The day would be worse, much worse, with the crushing heat, lack of water, and fast dehydrating of his battered, pain-racked body.

The sun rose slowly, dissipating the masses of riotous color that earlier gathered in the low eastern sky, and the sky turned to a hard, brazen blue. The somber red pinnacles took on a glow as the sun touched them, and black rimrock grew sharper edged against the tawny yellow of the sand. The night's coolness lingered, soon to be sucked away and replaced by the sun's imperturbable heat. The man raised his head as he crawled with bleeding hands up the ridge, hopeful for shelter from the sun. Perhaps on the other side of this basalt barrier there might be something, if only a hole that he could crawl into during the day. He looked back over the desert, and saw no shimmering mirages to match the whispering voices in his ears. They would come later. By noon this sun-parched hell would be falsely alive with them.

"Too early for the heat waves as yet."

He muttered that, too, aloud, as a tangible explanation of the phenomenon to come. The mirages would not fool him, any more than did the whispering voices. They were as much a part of this wilderness as the wild, forlorn beauty of it, and they belonged to its perils. A man had to include them in his estimate of chances, when setting about crossing the Harina. He would have been out of the desert by now, if bad luck had not conspired with both man and nature to topple him into sudden and unexpected catastrophe.

To think of the recent past, calmly and objectively, helped keep his clear senses from dwelling too deeply upon his hurts. For weeks he had been

on the dodge, living almost constantly in the saddle, a lone wolf hunted and hard pressed for the price that he carried on his head. And it stemmed from the political aspirations of a man he had never seen—a territorial governor who, seeking high Federal office, was anxious to wind up his term with a record. To lay by the heels this man, who now crawled wearily and doggedly up a basalt ridge in the desert, would go far toward building up that desired record.

This man was notorious, a tall figure with a stormy reputation that ran close to legend. He was the peg upon which was hung a thousand deeds for which no other culprit could be found. For years he had gone his tumultuous way, smoking out all traps set for him, until lawmen had given up and tacitly called a truce. But now, under the ambitious and implacable hand of the governor, the combined resources of the whole territory were turned loose against him.

Bounty hunters were trailing him in bands, dazzled by the price offered for him. Sheriffs and town marshals, once apt to walk the other way when he appeared, were now buckling on extra guns and scanning every stranger. Hard penalties had been declared in force against anybody who might aid him. He had become the most famous fugitive in the territory, and the most widely sought, and he looked for help from nobody. Self-sufficient, riding roughshod through the law whenever it got in his way, and having scores of enemies on both sides of it, he had always taken what he needed from any source he chanced to come upon and paid for it in one fashion or another.

But it had remained for some unknown bushwhackers to rip the bottom out of his sack. With his tall head bowed against the storm's wind and cutting sand, he had not even glimpsed them. They must have been behind some rocks, sheltering themselves from the storm, and recognized him as he rode by. He had no recollection of tumbling down into the canyon, and the sky had darkened when he came to his senses near the bottom. With blood-blinded eyes and a torn and battered body, climbing out had been a job.

He thought, with a shred of dour humor: "Hell, I don't even know who to cuss for it!"

He struggled the rest of the way up to the ragged crest of the ridge, and looked upon a monotony of more sand and black areas of broken malpais. A range of low hills, not far to the north, had the appearance of dry heaps of pepper and salt. The desert wind of the morning had died away. Nothing moved. The land was empty.

He sat down stiffly, his unsurrendering mind still an instrument of deliberate precision that kept searching for possibilities. At last he quit straining his bloodshot eyes. With a touch of grim fatalism, he took a broken cigar from the breast pocket of his black broadcloth coat,

and clamped strong white teeth on the end of it.

"Well," he muttered hoarsely, "it begins to look like we've run all out of chips, hanged if it don't!"

The Rev. Elmore Topcliff settled his small spare frame on the driver's seat of his huge old overland wagon, beside his daughter, Faith. After a last look around the night's camp site to make sure that he was forgetting nothing, he gathered up the lines and clucked to the six-mule team. Getting the customary lack of response from the mules, he appealed to their better judgment. He addressed them by names with which he had endowed them when he bought them two months before. The seller had assured him that they were as tractable as Mormon children, but upon inquiry had admitted reluctantly that he himself was a Baptist.

"Now, Sihon, remember what happened to thy namesake for his willfullness! And you, Og—giant that you are—pull! Amorite, Anakim, wake up the Moabite there—"

The mules were not impressed. They were Spanish mules, wiry, wayward, disdainful of reasoning, gentle persuasion and the Old Testament.

Faith Topcliff laughed softly. She was very young, and she had her father's quiet and whimsical humor. "I'm afraid you'll never teach them a proper respect for you, dad, unless you learn to . . . ahem . . . talk to them in freighters' language."

"My education fails me there," the reverend admitted mildly, and picked up the whip. "My friends," he apologized, "you leave me no alternative but this." He swung the whip.

This the mules could appreciate. Their broad leather housings snapped taut, the heavy trace chains jingled, and the big canvas-topped wagon creaked cumbrously into motion. Another day's journey had begun, one of many.

They were children of Providence, both of them, the elderly man and the young girl. Trust was their armor against all disillusionment, and happy serenity their shield against fear. The girl gazed about her, interested in the scenery, liking it for its strangeness, seeing nothing of its lurking claws. Under her sunbonnet her face was a warm cameo, and the poetic Mexicans would have said that the sun had got into her eyes. The Rev. Topcliff, wise in his gentle way, sometimes wondered what manner of man it would be who would bring even heightened aliveness and warmth to his daughter. He hoped for the best, as always.

The wagon trundled slowly away from the camp site, and rounded a long series of sheltering hills before straightening out for the southeast course. Her eyes thoughtful, Faith gazed back at the hills as they were left behind.

"They look," she said musingly, "like heaps of pepper and salt, don't they?"

Almost an hour later she touched

her father's arm. The wagon was dragging through the sandy lowland between the hills and a long basalt ridge, with the sun getting higher and hotter. "Dad, I do believe there's something moving over there! Near the foot of that ridge. See? Some kind of animal, and it acts as if it's injured. Why, look, it's rising up on— Dad, it's a man!"

The Rev. Topcliff changed course toward it, but another half-hour had elapsed before he halted the team within fifty yards of the lone man, and climbed down from the seat. For once in his life, as he came up to the man, he experienced a thrill of something close to superstitious awe. Beside her father, Faith stood rooted, her eyes very big.

II

The lone man stood like a tall specter of carnage, blood-spattered, yet with a chilling air of remoteness and grave austerity. The same contradiction was in his garb. From his long black coat and wide, flat-crowned hat, to his plain black riding boots, he could have been thought a minister. But the reverend sensed at once that this was no brother of the cloth, unless it was some mortal species of black angel descended from grace to gun smoke. The ministerial coat was ripped, allowing a glimpse of two crossed gun belts heavily studded with shells.

But it was the face that convinced the reverend. Blood, scratches, dirt, and an ugly wound near the black hair line, could not hide the fundamental qualities of that face. It was dark, stamped with ruthlessness and a hawklike strength. The nose was bold, predatory, the forehead broad, and the wide mouth was touched with a ghost of sardonic humor. The deep-set eyes, gray and bleak as winter sleet, held a terrible calmness that belonged nowhere between the two extremes of saint or sinner. The thought of Satan came to the mind of the reverend.

Satan inclined his tall, bloodied head. He said in a harsh voice that was strangely flattened: "Thanks for turnin' off your course."

The reverend grew aware of some kind of immense force in the man. Although the somber-garbed giant merely stood there, it was as if he were concentrating an inner power and waging a silent battle. It dawned upon the reverend that the man was hanging onto consciousness by the sheer will to do so.

"I . . . we . . . you must let us help you," he stammered, and an odd sense of formality caused him to introduce himself. "My name is Topcliff . . . er . . . *Rev.* Topcliff."

Saturnine humor came out fleetingly on the hard, wide mouth. "Glad to know you. My name's Devlin. *Preacher* Devlin!"

The grip slipped, and the strong will relinquished its losing fight. Like a very tired man, Preacher Devlin —top-flight gambler, master gun fighter, and fugitive at large— pitched over in his first step toward the wagon. He was quite unconscious while the reverend and Faith dragged him into the wagon and the

reverend, as he unpacked his medical kit, sternly reminded himself that the Good Samaritan had not allowed adverse appearance to deter him from giving succor.

Later, with the wagon in motion, Preacher Devlin suddenly opened glittering eyes and began to talk in a deep growl of things that the reverend only dimly comprehended. They were only scraps of talk, let loose by a cool and dominant mind that had temporarily slipped control, but they conjured up some sinister visions. The Rev. Topcliff looked into that strong, satanic face, and he shivered a little. Saving brands from the burning was his life work, but this wounded man of mystery was something much more than a burning brand. This was one of the pagan masters who stoked and ruled sin's dark fire.

Out of the cloudy pit, Preacher Devlin fought upward to a lucid moment. He said distinctly: "I ought to warn you. It's dangerous to help me. You may regret it."

The reverend had much the same thought, although he knew nothing of the circumstances. But he shook his head. "A Christian act is never regretted by a Christian," he said simply.

The chill gray eyes regarded him. No sort of emotion softened their hardness, but some of the cynicism left the grim mouth. "If ever you're in need of help, yourself, bear me in mind. Call on me for anything, any time. Remember that. This is a debt. I pay my debts."

Then clarity passed and gave way to more mutterings, and the reverend turned to his daughter, who was driving. "Faith," he asked, "please pay less attention to . . . er . . . the talk in here!"

Obediently, the girl faced front again, flushing, but she was privately sure that her father failed to understand the fundamental significance of those alien, forceful phrases of Preacher Devlin. She had never before met unsubdued power, nor an untamed man. Now, meeting them, she ascribed to them nobility and strong virtues. This was the way, she thought hazily, that the mighty Thor might have talked in his sleep after flinging his thunderbolts at the malignant horde, or Joshua after crashing down the walls of Jericho. A heightened aliveness and warmth ran through her, and she drove on with almost a sense of glory.

After a while, when the deep muttering had ceased, the reverend took his place on the driver's seat. "We must travel slowly and make early camp, for his sake," he murmured, and brightened as a thought occurred to him. "I think I shall use this incident as the basis of my first sermon in Rainbow!"

Like a heavily loaded barge under sail, the canvas-topped wagon rocked slowly along the high rim of Contention Creek, approaching the town of Rainbow. It drew some interest, most of it aimed at the girl sitting beside the gray little man on the driver's seat.

The workers scattered along the creek bed were of the usual run of fortune seekers, with a generous leavening of the tough and lawless. But where a big concentrating machine shook and rattled under the power of a steam engine, the men around it conformed to a more definite type. No misfits and wandering failures, these; their like was a standard quality to be found among gun-slingers of the top rank wherever the pay was highest. But to the Rev. Topcliff they were all men, future members of his flock, and he gazed almost paternally upon them as he drove his wagon along the rim trail.

The reverend and Faith had never before seen placer workings. They looked down at sluice boxes and rockers, and the big concentrator intrigued them with its elaborate set-up. It stood on a wide bench of the upper bank, a giant with a sloping deck, many riffles, and a feed hopper. They saw an iron vessel like an oversized tub, with a cable and dragline running from it high above the creek to a rocky promontory on the far side. Atop the promontory was a huge kettle and firebox, and more armed men stood around up there.

"The ingenuity of man is quite amazing," murmured the reverend.

"'Specially where gold's concerned!" came the dry comment from within the wagon, and the two on the driver's seat turned.

With a bandaged hand raising the edge of the wagon canvas, Devlin lay peering out. "Is this Rainbow we're enterin'?" he queried.

The reverend nodded brightly. "Yes, this is my destination at last. We'll find a doctor here for you, I'm sure."

Devlin lowered the canvas. "We won't bother. You're good-enough doctor for me." He studied his hands, badly gashed by climbing, bandaged by the reverend. The bullet score in his head sometimes made his eyes throb, and his muscles were stiff. He was in bad shape to meet big trouble. "I'd just as soon stay under cover for a spell, reverend."

Seeing the reverend's look of worry, he said more gently: "Most men have their enemies. It happens I've got a lot. If it were known where I am an' the shape I'm in, they'd be headin' my way in packs! I'll quit your wagon as soon as I can, but not by daylight!"

"I'm sorry," the reverend said troubledly. "I was thinking of mentioning you in my first sermon here."

Devlin eyed him, liking him, but grimly meditating, that between himself and death stood only this mild little pilgrim. He quoted gravely: " 'Tell it not in Gath . . . publish it not in the street of Askelon!' "

Driving on into Rainbow, the reverend whispered to Faith: "He actually quoted from the Old Testament!"

"Of course," said Faith serenely. "Why shouldn't he?"

As the wagon lurched into the deep ruts of Rainbow's main street,

it had to come to a halt because of a shouting crowd that jammed the street. Somebody was attempting to ride a magnificent, long-limbed black horse, and raising considerable dust about it.

The black horse didn't care for his rider, nor for the noisy crowd of onlookers, and he proceeded to make known his disapproval. He took two jumps, high and wide, and the stirrup leathers popped like pistol shots. But that was just a feeler. He threw in a high roller and came down all stiff-legged, jarring his rider's bones from ankle to skull. That was for punishment. Then he got down to real business.

He pulled a pretty series of weaving bucks, tightened them up into a rapid display of sunfishing acrobatics that made him look like a black streak of animated rubber, and wound it up by swapping ends faster than a cat changing its mind. That did the trick. Next thing, the Brindle Kid was sitting in the street with his hands full of dirt and his nose running blood. The crowd howled, and somebody caught the black and led him off to the Concordia livery stable.

Devlin, peering out between the front canvas flaps of the wagon, breathed words that did not belong to the testaments. The glitter lurked again in the sleety depths of his eyes, but not from any incipient delirium. There were faces in the crowd that he recognized from other days, chief among them those of the Brindle Kid, Blackfoot Roen, and Stampede Solary. The big black horse he had known at once; it was his own, an animal second only to himself in notoriety. Solary, he noticed, was studying the reverend's daughter with quick interest.

He began tearing the bandages from his injured hands, and while he worked at them, he watched a rangy young fellow come up to the halted wagon. The young fellow had a straight, good-humored look about him, and for that reason alone he stood out from the crowd. His candid young eyes were mostly on Faith, but he spoke respectfully to the Rev. Topcliff.

"Can I help you get located, sir?" he offered. "My name is Alec Bourne."

The reverend's trustful smile came forth. "Why, thank you. I'm the Rev. Elmore Topcliff, and this is my daughter, Faith. I was asked to come here to your town last year, but at that time—dear me, why is that young man shouting at us?"

The Brindle Kid, having failed to impress the audience with his riding, was off on another tack, and in a vicious mood that he hid with clownery. With his sleek head to one side, he stood braying in the street and pointing at the wagon mules. He capered to a crowded hitching rack, got himself a red Navajo saddle blanket, and came on the prance like a torcador, waving it. The Spanish mules shivered expectantly and cocked their long ears at him, perfectly willing to co-oper-

ate in a plunging stampede through the town.

Young Alec Bourne stood by the front end of the wagon. With tight mouth and a hand to his holster, he started around the team to bar the advance of the Brindle Kid, but two close-spaced shots, followed soon after by a third, caused him to yank out his gun and halt. The reverend ducked, and so did Faith, their ears ringing from the reports just above and behind their heads. They were the only ones who could have told with any accuracy where the shots came from. The peak-crowned sombrero flew from the head of the Brindle Kid, and as he dropped the saddle blanket and cut his left hand hipward, the second bullet slapped that hand. The third shot, fired as if on afterthought following a brief pause, took care of his right-hand gun; its poking bone handle burst apart from the impact of the bullet that struck and wrecked the breech. After the first startled moment, the crowded street hushed, all eyes on the young killer standing, hatless and amazed, by the crumpled saddle blanket.

The Brindle Kid didn't look so perky now, but more like a soulless young gnome that had got a thrashing. He stared down at his dripping left hand, and then at Alec Bourne and the drawn gun. A shudder shook his body, and the raging wildness that leaped into his eyes was equal to insanity. His warped and perverted pride, the sustenance of his lurid life, had twice been pierced within five minutes.

"You . . . you—" Profanity of the gutter, mucky and grotesque, poured from his thinned, twisted lips. At a nod from Solary, morose Blackfoot Roen stepped over to the Kid and led him away, still cursing.

Marshal Bourne came plodding along, frowning at everybody, a soured old man trying to cling to the last empty vestige of his waned authority. As he came up to the wagon, Old Alec saw the gun in his son's hand, and he made the same error that the Brindle Kid and the crowd had made. Anger darkly flushed his lined face.

"Tryin' to be a gun fighter, huh?" he barked. "You young fool—"

"Really, you are quite mistaken, marshal," interrupted the reverend. "That young man—"

He was interrupted, himself, at that point, by Devlin's hand through the canvas, prodding him silent. And just then four worried-looking individuals came following in the wake of Rainbow's angry marshal. Old Alec Bourne raised his face to the little man on the wagon seat. "What did you start to say? Who're you, anyway?"

Young Alec gave the answer. "He's the Rev. Topcliff, dad. Remember that name?"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" groaned one of the four men, and threw up his hands in dismay. "As if we ain't got trouble enough, without that! What did you come for, reverend? There ain't no place here for you—not now. Holy cow, not now!"

III

The man who was doing all the lamenting had eyes that were magnified large behind thick spectacles, and a nervous manner. "I'm Bob Peattie, the mayor," he made himself known, "and these three gents are the town council—Colonel Rorick, Harvey Colville, and Bat Brown. Why, reverend, it's over a year since we wrote and asked you here, and you wrote back and refused."

"A year ago your town did not need me," the reverend pointed out. "It obviously does now, so I came. Have you a church?"

"We-ell, we did have last year." Mayor Peattie looked around at the councilmen, but they only gazed down at their boots. "But not now," he amended, and blinked at a dance hall along the street. "It's been . . . uh . . . turned into something else."

The understanding reverend sighed. "Never mind; I can use a tent for the time being. But I *would* appreciate some kind of living quarters for myself and my daughter."

The mayor and council, by mute but unanimous vote, turned that matter over to Marshal Bourne, and retired, mumbling good wishes on the reverend. For a minister of the gospel to come to a roaring hell camp like Rainbow created a very delicate problem, and they wanted none of it, so they loaded it onto the sagging shoulders of the harassed old lawman. Old Alec scowled helplessly after them. His baffled expression said that he expected the worst and didn't know what to do about it. Squinting out through the slit of the wagon canvas, Devlin saw no happy solution in sight as yet, either.

"Livin' quarters, huh? I dunno, I swear." Old Alec wandered around the wagon, inspecting it absently, stalling for time. The town was packed. Cubbyholes were renting for five dollars a night. "Mebbe I could . . . I dunno. How much stuff you got with you?"

He poked his head between the rear flaps for a look inside. After a queer gulp, he said no more, nor did he move. Young Alec, curious about that behavior, joined him. He, too, looked inside. And he, too, froze silent.

With a long-barreled gun tilted in his scarred right hand, Devlin said softly: "One yelp, hombres, an' it'll be your last, I promise you!"

He knew by their faces that they had recognized him at once, and knew that he had handed them the shock of their lives. His appearance and description were too well known, too well published for him to escape immediate detection in any crowd, anywhere. They might have entertained a natural faint doubt that he was dead, in spite of seeing his horse brought in, and the Brindle Kid's bragging. Preacher Devlin had been known to emerge from other disasters just as seemingly final. But they certainly hadn't looked for him to turn up alive in

There was something weirdly sinister about the black-garbed figure that came stumbling toward the wagon.

Rainbow, and in a minister's wagon of all places.

Old Alec swallowed several times. "It's the law you got your gun on, Preacher!" he brought out at last, and then appeared to realize that it was a futile and unnecessary statement. His badge was large and in sight, and Devlin had never been reputed to show any particular discrimination between lawmen and lesser mortals.

"So here's where those shots came from!" young Alec said. "I was wondering. Shucks, dad, you know I don't shoot that good!" He stared into the forbidding face of the notorious gun fighter, and added pointedly: "But I can sure try if I have to!"

The reverend and Faith looked in through the front. "Oh, dear me!" murmured the reverend. He was aghast at what he saw.

Not so, Faith. "How dare you pry into our wagon!" she challenged the two Bournes.

Old Alec blinked at her. "Now you looka here, young lady! You an' your pa are hidin' a . . . a mighty bad hombre in your wagon! Yessir, a mighty bad—"

"You don't know what you're talking about!" she flashed back at him hotly. "Do you call it bad to stop a gunman from frightening a team? Why didn't *you* stop that man? Isn't that what you're paid to do?" Her eyes blazed at young

Alec. "All *you* did was take the credit for shooting at him!" she ended scornfully.

Her young face glowed with righteous indignation. She wasn't the quiet, demure little parson's daughter now. She was all wound up. Old Alec struggled for speech, and only sputtered. Young Alec went as red as a shamed criminal at the bar. The reverend gazed at his daughter in alarm, not knowing what to make of all this.

To Devlin it was something of a novel experience, having a young slip of a girl like this one taking up for him so wholeheartedly. He regarded Old Alec with some dry humor.

"You're pretty near outnumbered, marshal," he observed, and motioned with his gun. "Climb up in here, you two, an' guide the reverend to his new quarters. An' don't get any foolish ideas, on the way. If things pop, you're apt to be first on the list to go!"

Old Alec glared at him. "For one thing," he stated chokedly, "there ain't an empty room in this town to be had for—"

"In that case," cut in Devlin, "we'll just have to take you up on your invitation, an' move in with you! Drive on, reverend!"

The marshal stamped up and down his own living-room floor like a scandalized bear crowded out of its den, darting glowering looks at the long, black-coated figure of Devlin, who had taken possession of the couch. Quarters had been made in the marshal's house for the

Topcliffs. Young Alec, rising creditably to the occasion, had waved away their doubts and protests. Plenty of room, he said. He and his father, he assured them, were only too glad to share their house with refined folks. Somewhat pointedly, he neglected to include the Preacher in that last statement.

Rev. Topcliff, with a shine in his mild eyes, spoke of his work. He had already located a site for his tabernacle tent, on a level space of waste land not fifty yards from the rear of the house. Tomorrow he would begin building benches and a pulpit. Sunday, he would hold his first service. In a few weeks, he predicted, the town would build a real church.

"Don't bet on that," remarked Devlin. "This is a wolf town, an' it'd take more than a Bible to tame it!"

"'They shall give tithes and cause a church to be built,'" quoted the reverend, a stern edge to his voice.

Devlin shrugged his broad shoulders. "An' I'll sit in the congregation!"

The reverend gave him a long, pensive look. "That alone would make all my work worth while," he declared gravely, and walked out.

As soon as the door closed, Old Alec stopped his pacing and swung a gnarled finger at Devlin. "You can't hold me a prisoner in my own house, blast it!" he declared.

Devlin gazed musingly at the irate old lawman, and eased himself to another position on the couch. "No," he agreed. "I can't watch you day an' night, that's sure." He thought of all the hunters scouring the country for him. When the report got spread around that he was dead, bushwacked by Stampede Solary and a couple of hirelings, there would be a letup in the hunting. Then he would be able to make a dash for Old Mexico, and be clear out of this country before the next hue and cry stormed loose.

It wasn't going to be easy to lie in hiding, right here in Rainbow, but the desperate situation demanded it, and so did Devlin's battered body. Just a few days would do it. But if the slightest hint or whisper got out that he was here, he'd be blown up for keeps. Even if he could hold off the Solary crowd, there'd be the governor's men and the free-lance bounty hunters riding fast this way in droves to bring him in. Well, the reverend wouldn't let it out, and neither would Faith. They weren't as yet aware of the circumstances, but he'd asked them to keep quiet about him, and they could be trusted. Young Alec Bourne wouldn't talk, either. He was pretty obviously in love with the girl, and didn't want to bring any trouble upon her and her father. This old law hound here, though, was a different proposition.

"I wonder now," Devlin muttered, "if I dare put you on your word—or if you'd give it!"

Bourne narrowed his eyes. He was wise enough to recognize the advantage that still remained to him. "Devlin," he said evenly, "you're on

one almighty big powder keg—the worst ever! An' you ain't in no shape right now to handle it if it goes off! That Solary crowd is a mighty tough combination, let me tell you, an' that's leavin' out all the others around the country who'd give their teeth to get you. But I know about you. I know what's in your mind. You're figgerin' to lay low till you're ready, then bust out o' here an' blow this town apart before you hit for the border. Well, this is still my town, bad as 'tis, an' I'll be hanged if—" He paused.

Devlin was slowly shaking his head. "You're on the wrong bronc," he contradicted harshly. "I'll kick over no kegs in this town, now or later. But not on your account."

With the wind taken out of his sails, the marshal tugged at his mustache. "I guess," he said finally, "the rev'rend saved your life, out there in the Harina. Is it because he'd catch holy Ned for it if it got known you're here an' he brung you? That it? By jacks, Devlin, mebbe you're almost human, after all!"

"I figure," Devlin grunted, "he's liable to spill more genuine hell over this cussed town than I could, that's all! He's a pretty good little hombre. Asks no questions. Hanged if I don't like him."

"So do I. He'll do to take along, all right."

"Yeah. He's going to need plenty help here. I'd do it, but that wouldn't work out. It's your job. Don't let him down, *sabe?*"

"Sure," agreed the marshal. He grinned faintly and frostily. "Mebbe you an' me ain't so far apart in some ways, at that. When'll you be leavin'?"

"About Sunday night, I reckon, if the town's quiet enough. I'll raise no ruckus leaving, if I can help it."

"Your word on that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I 'reckon I can give my word, too. I'm a clam till Sunday night. No need to watch me."

Old law dog and veteran long rider exchanged brief nods, all that either of them needed to make the deal binding. They understood each other, from opposite sides of the law's high fence.

In a town like Rainbow Sunday night could be expected to be a resounding echo of Saturday night—rip-roaring and wild. But this Sunday night was different. No revivalist could have wished for a better crowd than the Rev. Topcliff was drawing into his big canvas tabernacle. Most of the saloons and dance halls were quiet, and even the Concordia had closed its doors. For half an hour there had been a steady flow toward the tent behind the marshal's house.

It was such a well-behaved crowd that Devlin was inclined to distrust it on principle. Ministers and revivalists did saloon owners no good, and the owners could be expected to fight against reform. But the saloonmen and gamblers of Rainbow seemed to be cooperating tonight to make the reverend's opening skirmish against the devil a solid

success. It looked too good to be true.

However, from the rear window of the marshal's darkened house, Devlin watched the last of the crowd troop into the lighted tent, and he saw nothing to verify his suspicions. Nobody was carrying any dead cats, or paper "snakes" of gunpowder, or solemnly leading a beer-hiccuping burro into the meeting. The confused shadows on the tent canvas settled to an orderly pattern, voices ceased murmuring, and there came the time of silence. Then, faint but clear in the hushed night, sounded the gentle, pleased voice of the reverend:

"Dear people . . . friends . . . I cannot express in words my gladness at seeing so many of you here tonight. I . . . I am really overwhelmed—"

Devlin turned away from the opened window, and the hesitant voice faded from his hearing as he made his way through the house toward the front door. Now was as good an hour as any in which to slip quietly out of Rainbow. There was only one detail to attend to, and that was the stealing of his own horse from the Concordia stable. He hoped to do that undetected. Outside of that, he would forego taking a crack at those who had done him dirt in the Harina, for the sake of the little reverend, who had helped him out of it. Also, it would give him more time to reach Mexico before folks became aware that he was still alive and on his way.

He opened the front door, and the voice of the reverend reached to him again in the hush: "—so let us turn to the one hundred and thirty-third Psalm: 'Behold, how good a thing it is, in unity to dwell—'"

Then the lid blew off.

First, giving the cue and blasting the solemn quiet, rose the braying whoop of the Brindle Kid. It rang out through the town, and its tail was lost in the discordant uproar that it touched off. Yells, catcalls, roaring laughter — the splintering crash of a flimsy bench being smashed over another—a bottle that hit and shivered the canvas, and a thunder of exploding guns. The Concordia crowd was hoorawing the little reverend without mercy and without the saving grace of good humor. They were out to wreck his tent and—— humble fixings, and run him out of town.

Devlin stood very still in the open door, his hard mouth drawn down, eyes pale and oblique. As the racket got louder, he gave his head a short and savage shake. This was none of his affair. He had nothing to bet on a penniless little pilgrim who was simple enough to think that he could uplift a hell hole like Rainbow. His affair was to quit town like a shadow and head south, and on doing this his life depended. Better to get his horse and go, taking advantage of the racket, and leave the problem in the marshal's lap. It was the marshal's job, anyway, and old Alec Bourne had certainly talked as though he was prepared to handle it —he and that husky young son of his

But still Devlin didn't leave, and now he was fighting himself, fighting down his impulses and calling himself a fool for having them. He tugged down the wide brim of his black, flat-crowned hat. "Damn it, I've got to get out o' here!" he muttered, and stepped out onto the street.

Yonder was the Concordia stable, unwatched and unguarded, his big black inside, ready for him to saddle and ride away. To the south lay Mexico. He could be well on his way, come morning, and then all hell couldn't catch up with him, for he'd have under him the best horse in the territory and an open track ahead. Maybe it wasn't as bad as it sounded from here, in that tent. Maybe it was just a bunch of roughnecks having fun, and after the marshal had them corralled in the *juzgado* they'd pay their fines and shake hands with the reverend. New sky pilgrims had that kind of rough initiation to contend with, often enough, and if they were good sports they became popular fixtures in the town.

Somebody came pattering around the house and ran full into Devlin. It was Faith, sobbing, terror in her eyes, and that terror wiped away all notions about rough fun. She clung to the tall, somber gun fighter, and in this instant it came to Devlin as a dim flash of ominous warning, that the girl showed no slightest timidity with him. She appeared to regard him as a kind of champion, a reliable and invincible guardian to whom she could turn to in extremity.

"Help him! They've all gone mad!" Her small hands pulled at him. "Oh, please—quick — help him! They're—"

"What's the marshal doing?" Devlin broke in. "An' Alec?"

"A lot of men have got them in a corner, holding guns on them—laughing at them!"

"Where's your father?"

"In the pulpit. Just standing there . . . standing there and preaching! They're all shouting at him and throwing things at him! Oh, please—hurry!"

Devlin's face was a baleful mask. He said in a mutter, talking mostly to himself: "If I get into this, my last chance is busted! If I throw away this chance, I'll never get another! They'll make sure o' that. That damned governor—"

"Oh, please!" The girl was hearing nothing of what he was saying. Her mind was still back in that tent. "You promised! You promised dad if ever he needed help, you'd give it —that you owed him a debt and you'd pay it any time he asked!"

Devlin brought his bleak eyes back to the pleading young face, and gave a slight start. "That's right, I did. I remember that." He uttered a short laugh, and his eyes suddenly took on a glitter of violent recklessness that he was not wholly reluctant to welcome. "All right, girl—let's go to church meetin'!"

IV

The tent was a bedlam, the sides shaking and shadows jumbled on

the canvas. Some of them in there were howling a saloon song now, in between shooting off their guns and breaking benches. Others apparently were thrusting at the tent poles, making the lighted lanterns swing and dance dangerously.

Devlin got to one end of the long tent, pulled up the edge of the canvas, and ducked through. His ministerial coat hung open, and his scarred hands were spread ready, but for the moment he was unnoticed in the riotous tumult. Directly before him he saw the pulpit, plain and unpainted, the best that Rev. Topcliff had been able to build from materials at hand and from a slender purse. Devlin was behind it, the reverend's back toward him. The reverend stood up there in his little pulpit, arms hanging, shaking his grayed head in a dazed, incredulous way, while chaos raged before him and jeering voices howled at him. The core of the wreckers was the Solary mob. Other men — the hangers-on, the riffraff of the town —were following the lead.

Catching the reverend by the back of his coat, Devlin lifted him out of the pulpit as if plucking a marooned kitten down from a tree. The reverend turned a white and quivering face to him, but no immediate recognition came into his shocked eyes. He had a look of horror about him, and that look pulled the last tight notch on the Preacher's anger.

Devlin stepped up into the pulpit, and his pair of heavy guns dented the wood as he slammed them down. His eyes, glimmering with cold wrath, ranged over the rioting mob. He saw Solary, the first to sight him, jerk and go motionless and wax-hued. Then his sardonic side came uppermost, bringing with it the saturnine humor that cloaked his most reckless, ruthless moods.

"Preacher Devlin—taking over the service!" he thundered, and the metallic edge of his voice knifed through the uproar. Each of his guns roared a single shot apiece. One man, wrenching at a center pole, jerked away a hand that was shy a finger. Another, swinging a wooden bench high over his head, ended his laughter and fell asprawl with the bench and a broken shoulder.

Like a powerful brake being clamped down on a team of bronco brutes stampeding downhill, the uproar faltered and died away. The crowd stood all askew and stilled, and abruptly there was only harsh breathing to rustle the new silence. Staring, unbelieving eyes were seeing a ghost in the pulpit—a tall, black ghost, satanic and armed, ready and willing to trade gun smoke —where before had stood a bowed, broken little minister.

Somebody muttered huskily, sounding loud in the lack of other noises: "It's a damn lie! It ain't him! Can't be—can't be—"

The Brindle Kid was known as well for his nerve as for his brag. His mouth changed shape to the contortioning movements of his tongue and lips, and at last he said in little more than a whisper: "How, Preacher!" He had one hand in a

sling, and he wore only one gun now, but he was crazy enough to take a chance if he thought he saw one.

"'Lo, Kid. Sit down." Devlin's ominous stare bored at the young killer, and the Brindle Kid slowly sat down. "All o' you sit down! *Sit down, I say!*"

Again a long-barreled gun blared from the pulpit. In the rear of the tent, a man dropped something and swayed out through the exit, his face sick and all his rashness drained out. Devlin did not watch him go. His baleful, mocking stare kept sweeping over the mob, and he held his guns tilted, the hammers thumbed back.

He had them. The shocking amazement of seeing him appear in the pulpit like a specter from the dead had for the time petrified them, and they were all under his eyes. When they slowly began uprighting the benches and sitting on them, watching his poised guns, obeying him, Devlin knew that the high crisis was staved off for this moment at least. Having failed to call his hand right away, they could be dominated further before they blew up. Solary was the kingpin of this crowd, but he had brains and patience, and would not be likely to set off the explosion while sitting on the lid. The Brindle Kid had chosen discretion, temporarily. Blackfoot Roen, was dangerous, but he lacked initiative.

It was like holding the whip in a cage full of wild cats, each beast respectful of the whip, but the whole pack capable of swiftly seizing the mastery if it got any chance at all to organize. Devlin didn't figure to let that chance out of the bag.

From a rear corner of the tent, Marshal Bourne and Alec came forward together, carefully passing along the aisle of wooden benches. Both had been held there, raging and impotent under a dozen guns during the riot. Faith appeared, coming from one side of the tent and gazing at Devlin as if he were more than mere man. Alec paused by her and murmured something, but she only shook her head disregardingly, not even looking at him, and he bit his lip and passed by. The marshal glowered with a queer mingling of emotions at the Preacher.

Devlin banged a gun barrel on the pulpit. "It's pretty clear that this congregation's got no use for psalms," he drawled. "Maybe it'll suit better if we head right into the sermon—an' I want silence while I give it! *Sabe?* Reverend, what'll the subject be?"

He waited for a reply, while his compelling survey raked over the tensed faces before him. At last it came, low-voiced and solemn: "The story of Sodom and Gomorrah!"

Devlin nodded. Beneath the frozen calm of his irony, his mood was a white-hot flame, the flicker of it visible and sinister in his eyes. "Brethren!" he intoned, sonorous as a copper bell. "It once came to pass that a couple o' tough camps sprang up, like this Rainbow town, called Sodom an' Gomorrah. They finally

got so ornery. . . . Hm-m-m, just a minute. Hats off in church, heathens!"

He fired without apparent aim, and Solary's fine Stetson spun in the air with two new vents in it. Every other hat came off. It was the kind of casual, accurate shooting warranted to cause any dissenter to think long thoughts. The pulpit commanded a clear vantage over everybody in the tent, and the man-killing power of those two long guns needed no advertising.

Devlin went on, with the blandness of a lecturing judge. "This pair o' hell camps finally got so ornery tough, a posse of angels flew in one day an' cleaned 'em out. But a gent by the name of Lot, bein' a pretty square hombre, was tipped off that the big law was comin'. He gathered his folks an' took to the hills just in time. But his wife, with more idle curiosity than was good for her, looked back, although she'd been warned not to. That was her mistake. She got turned into a pillar o' salt. That's the sermon. Pass the collection plate, Faith!"

Obediently, Faith looked around for it, but it wasn't in sight.

"Use Solary's hat," Devlin told her. "Begin at the back row—an' let me know right away if any cheap nonconformer tries to hold out! Brethren, you're about to chip in for a new church, an' I want to see gold go into that hat. Nothin' less than twenty-dollar pieces! You've had your fun; now pay for it. As you drop in your donations, walk out nice an' quiet, one at a time. Remember Lot's wife. The moral is: *Don't look back!*"

Late that night, Old Alec Bourne turned from peering out through the drawn shades of his front window, and his querulous glance lighted on Devlin. The gun master stood by the table with the reverend and Faith, counting coins. Mayor Peattie and the three councilmen were there, looking very uncertain of themselves, while young Alec stood doing nothing much more than looking miserably at Faith.

"I might've known you wouldn't quit without pullin' some kind o' rusty on this town!" Old Alec rasped. "Well, you ain't gettin' away with that money, there, I tell you that!"

Devlin raised his eyes from the heap of gold coins on the table, as he finished counting. "All I did was give a sermon," he pointed out dryly. "You'll admit it was needed bad." He shoved the money over to the reverend. "Don't feel backward about usin' this. They owed it to you, an' they gave it. You got enough there to build a church no town need be ashamed of."

Old Alec still bushed his brows angrily, stubbornly. "Half the town's hot on the prod, now you've showed y'self! Every door, alley an' hole out there has got shadows that don't belong! It means a battle if you step outside!"

Devlin gave his crossed belts a hitch. "Quit fretting. I said I'd leave tonight, an' I will!" The turbulent urge of the gun fighter was alive in him, with its component

quality of icy calm that blanked all expression from his eyes and made even harder the granite cast of his face.

"But you can't leave now!" spoke up the reverend.

"Why can't I?"

"You said," the reverend explained patiently, "that if this town caused a church to be built, you would join the congregation!" His kindly eyes held a determined gleam. "Well, here is the money to build that church. The town gave it. They are causing a church to be built!"

"Besides," chimed in Faith, "we still need your help! As long as this town remains as bad and lawless as it is, we'll always need you! You can't leave us; you gave your word!"

Devlin nearly winced. "Now, listen!" he growled. "You don't understand. I can't stay, now that I'm known to be here. I've got to be on my way, before—"

"But we do need you," insisted the reverend quietly. "We need you here, as *much as you needed us in* the desert!"

"I gave the marshal my promise that I'll pull out tonight. That's final!" Devlin felt somewhat grateful to Bourne for eliciting that promise from him, now. It was going to get him out of this awkward situation. It meant sure death for him, if he stuck around here while the governor's army of hunters came pounding in from all directions. All he wanted was a smoky farewell to this town of Rainbow, and a fast ride south.

Mayor Peattie cleared his throat. "As far as that goes," he piped up, "the authorities of this town, as represented by myself and the council, would not object to you staying here . . . ah . . . Mr. Devlin!"

"*Gracias!*" returned Devlin dryly. "Solary's got your town in his fist, an' the law's all shot to blazes, so you wouldn't object if I stayed—on your side! No bet, gentlemen! I've got myself to think of. And, anyway, town doesn't concern me, in the least."

"But it must, don't you see? Because it concerns us," put in Faith. "If you go, what will happen to us here?"

The town council went through their silent communion of exchanged glances. Colonel Rorick, a stiff-mannered man, spoke with genteel reserve. "Miss Topcliff is . . . hum . . . entirely justified in her fears. Solary holds the town, and he's a vengeful man. No scruples at all. He'd take it out on the reverend and . . . hum. Yes, indeed. Frankly, we can't vouch for the safety of anybody in Rainbow any more. Independent placer miners get murdered, and Solary's men take over their claims and workings. Solary even stole that big claim of his from the Bournes, and stole Alec's ideas on how to work it. We may as well admit that lawlessness has gone far past the point where our marshal can handle it. With all respect to you, Bourne—and to you, Alec—I think that was evident to-night!"

"I believe," insinuated Mayor Peattie, "the marshal may now wish to say a few words. Eh, Bourne?"

Old Alec, looking older than he had a moment before, let his shoulders slump. "I s'pose you're right," he mumbled. "It's got way too big for me. If Devlin don't leave tonight, that's all right with me, I guess." He tramped out of the room, blinking heavily like a man who had lost something.

With his last excuse gone, Devlin felt trapped, like a wild hawk chained and ready for executioners. But a bullet and the desert had placed him under total obligation to the Topcliffs. His life belonged to them as long as they needed him, and he paid his bets and debts—always, and on both sides of the ledger.

"All right, reverend, you win! I'll stick as long as you need me."

"Thank you, my friend," replied the reverend, and in his eyes was a glow that Devlin darkly suspected boded him no good. It bespoke a rising hope of converting a certain law-smashing pagan to respectable ways and lawful pastures, in time.

Faith's young eyes were bright with a different kind of glow, as she gazed at Devlin. It was a look that made young Alec tighten his mouth and grow lean in the face.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she breathed, and Alec turned sharply away.

Devlin bit deeply into his chewed and unlighted cigar. He didn't mind so much the prospect of tangling some more with the Solary crowd. As for the governor's horde of hunters, well, they'd come when they'd come. He could face the event without any crumbling of his fatalism, and certainly without any panic. But he could very well do without the uplifting efforts of a sky pilgrim, the dazzled and mistaken worship of the pilgrim's innocent young daughter, and the red jealousy of a right-minded young fellow in love with that girl. Such things were highly explosive and unpredictable in their potentialities.

He scowled the mayor and town councilmen out of the house, and those worthies departed unsure whether to congratulate themselves or not. Devlin knew their game. It suited them very well for him to stay and back up the reverend. His presence would draw the governor's law to Rainbow, and maybe they could induce all that law to clean up their town for them, when it got here. By means of his obligation and word to the Topcliffs, the mayor and council were using him as a foil against the Concordia crowd, and a sacrificial decoy to bring in big law.

Sometimes, Devlin meditated, respectable men evinced as much cunning strategy as the most wiry of outlaws.

V

Next day Devlin ran afoul of the reverend. He was striding out of the marshal's house, and found his path barred by the little churchman, who was just entering.

"You mustn't go out there, Devlin!" Topcliff said excitedly.

"Why not?" the Preacher asked.

"They're waiting for you! The town is like an armed camp!"

"That's why I'm going out!" Devlin's chill stare caused the reverend to flinch. "It's not my way to hide out from the like o' this!"

Faith appeared behind her father, and Alec with her. The marshal came plodding up, too. They gathered before the tall, grim-visaged gun fighter, and he sent his gaze beyond them at a half dozen men loitering in an alley across the street. The whole town was as hushed as a graveyard.

"It's got to come, I know that, Devlin," Old Alec said stonily. "We all know it. But you got to abide by the law while you're here!"

"D'you expect me to stay cooped up? I'll tame this town, or go to smash with it! When that's done, my bill's paid—an' I'll either be on my way, or you can bury me, reverend! It's got to be done today, an' the sooner the better!" Devlin had come to that decision during the night. Maybe he could pay his bill and still reach Old Mexico ahead of the hunting horde. He could feel that horde closing in on him, thundering in from all over the territory. The word must have gone out in the night, he knew, that the notorious fugitive had showed up in Rainbow, and the news would be spreading fast.

"Wait a few minutes, that's all I ask. Mayor Peattie's comin'." Old Alec passed a hand over his face. "He—I reckon he's comin' to ask you to take my badge. We had it out this mornin', him an' me, an' the council. They said I'm gettin' too old. This is my last day on the job."

Devlin kept his eyes on the alley. "I don't need any badge—yours or any other!"

Old Alec nodded. "I know. I know. But I'm still the marshal till Peattie gets here. After I step down, you can let 'er rip, 'cause I just won't give a hoot any more. Old an' worn-out, that's me. That's what they said. Old an' worn-out!" He came in, passed Devlin, and sat down. He fiddled absently with the badge on his vest, and stared at the floor. Marshal Alec Bourne, for thirty years the lawman of Rainbow, was all washed up.

Young Alec went and stood by his father, and the look he sent Devlin was bitter. The men, becoming conscious of being watched, vanished from the alley. Devlin came back in and stood by the front window, watching for the next pattern to shape up; ready to locate its possible flaws. The Concordia crowd spurred by enmity and the prospect of high bounty and knowing that peril stalked them as long as he lived, was out to get him if they could. Tonight, if he waited, might be too late; they'd have him ringed inside the house again, as they had last night, with sharpshooters posted to cut him down as soon as he emerged. Now was the time to step out and meet them at their game, in daylight, while they expected him to keep to cover.

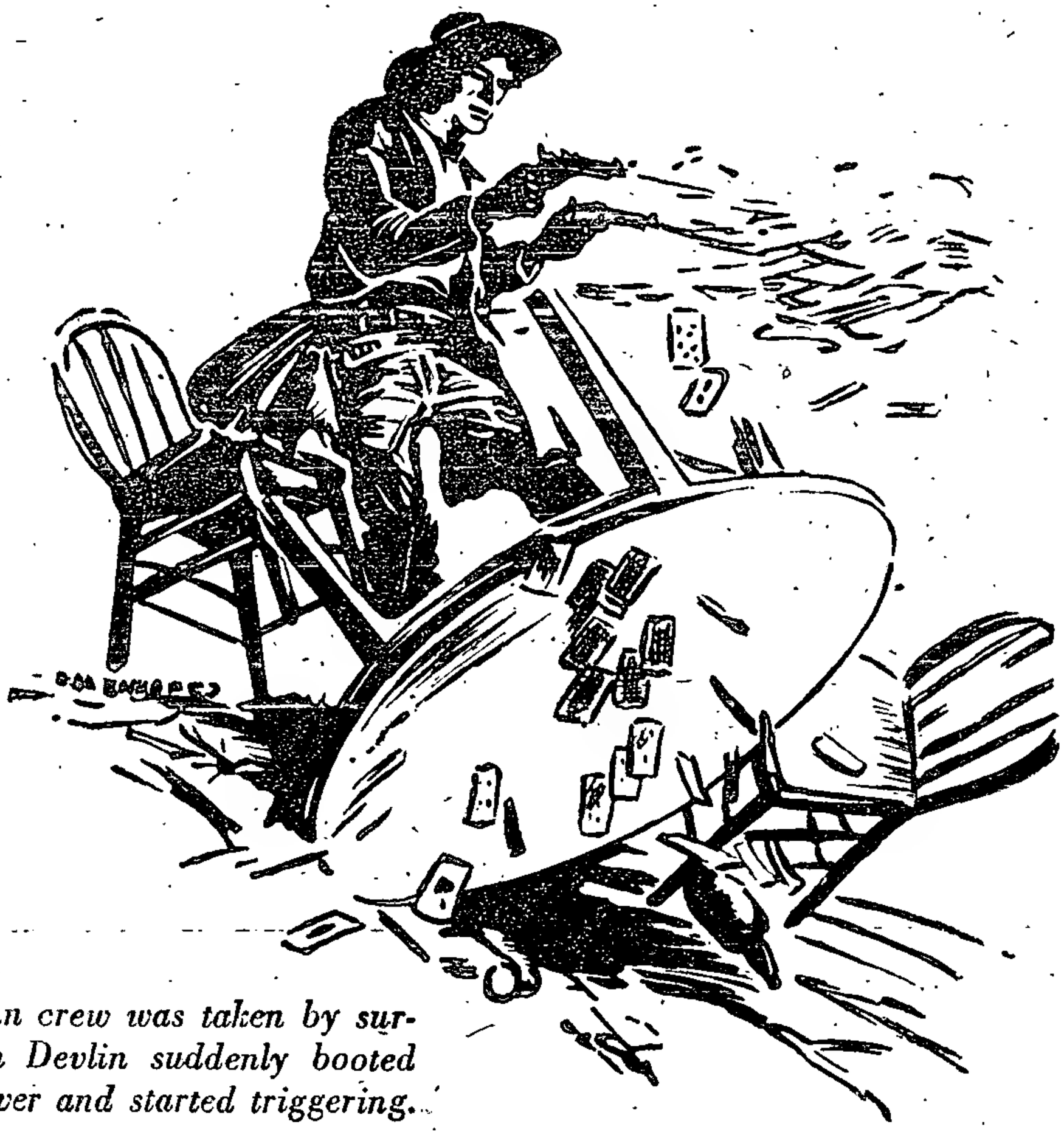
A shot, a high yell, and a crash-

ing of bottles suddenly came from inside the Concordia. It sounded as if some drunk had gone amuck in there. Another report cracked, and somebody uttered a pained cry. A dance-hall girl gave a raucous scream and quit abruptly at the pitch of it. Stampede Solary, himself, stepped hastily out through the Concordia doors and raised an urgent shout.

"Hey, where's the law? Fellow's gone crazy in here, shooting everybody! Where's that broken-down old plug of a marshal?"

Old Alec reared up out of his chair, bristling like an aged watch dog roused from reveries by a sound in the night. "Huh? What'd he call me? Broken-down ol' plug! By jinks, I'll show 'em! Stand back, everybody; I'll tend to this! I'll show 'em what an ol' worn-out, broken-down plug like me can do, when he—" Old Alec's rumble trailed off as he barged out of the house and across the street to the saloon.

Young Alec took off after his father. The shooting started up again in the saloon before he got there. Then sudden silence, and seconds



Solary's gun crew was taken by surprise when Devlin suddenly booted the table over and started triggering.

later a rapid pounding of hoofs beating away from the rear of the Concordia. Somebody shouted loudly: "He got away all right, that hombre —but he sure scattered hell behind him!"

Mayor Peattie and the three councilmen came trotting into the Bourne house and hauled up against Devlin.

"What's happened?" blurted the mayor. "Has it started?"

"I reckon you could say it has," Devlin answered. "They've started to whittle us down, anyway! It might've been better for you hombres if I'd pulled out last night, or tried to. Because I stayed, it's brought things to a head this mornin'—an' you're all up to your necks in it with me!"

He gazed somberly through the window at the doors of the Concordia. "There goes the last trace o' law this town had left! It was a plant, an' the old man walked slam into it. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe it's a pity you told him he was worn-out. It got under his hide. Solary called him worse, an' that did it. Pretty soon young Bourne'll be comin' back to tell us his dad's been shot. Yeah, here he comes now —carryin' him!"

Alec Bourne, with a new look of age and hardness on him, tramped in with his father in his arms and laid him carefully on the couch. Old Alec had his eyes open, and he said almost gently: "Don't take it so hard, young un. I lasted a long time. Too long, mebbe. Devlin—"

"What is it, marshal?"

"No need to call me that. I ain't the marshal here no more." Old Alec dragged a bloodied hand over his vest. His fingers curled around the badge and he tore it off. "She's all yours, an' welcome! Damn this town, anyway. Give 'em law, Preacher—your kind o' law! Mine warn't strong enough. You an' the rev'rend . . . run the law an' the fear o' hell into 'em! You'll do that, rev'rend?"

"We'll try," said the reverend softly. "Won't we, Devlin?"

The Preacher took the badge. "Looks that way."

Old Alec grinned faintly. "Funny . . . the Preacher an' the rev'rend . . . teamed together! Good luck. Wish I could . . . hang around . . . an' watch—" His mouth went lax, and the reverend knelt.

Alec Bourne gazed down for a long time at the grayed, lined face, and at last he looked around him with slow, unseeing eyes. "Some fellow—drunk — was shooting up Solary's barroom," he muttered. "Dad tried to stop him."

Devlin nodded. "An' the drunk shot him an' got away. A stranger, of course, on a fast horse. Just came an' went, an' nobody ever saw him before. Yeah, that's the way it always goes." To him it was a stale story. He had seen it enacted in many towns, many times, and it generally ran to the same design. Just an unwanted man lying dead, and another man who rode off cold sober and returned later to laugh about it. Just another job.

Alec stared at the gun fighter,

standing tall and remote-eyed. His mouth pinched tight. "It was a plant, then? And you knew and let him go! Damn you for a cold-blooded—"

"Your dad knew it, too," Devlin cut in flatly. "He was no fool. This was his last day, an' he gambled it away. That was the way he wanted it. I never try to stop any man from doin' what he wants to do." He was stating a part of the elemental code by which he lived. This was a law of the world. His world. Jungle law.

He had a jet of sympathy for young Bourne, but for Old Alec he had nothing but understanding. When a man was all washed up, it was time to gamble everything on one last throw, and step off the end of the trail without regrets. Life, as Preacher Devlin regarded it, was meant to be lived, not merely endured. He lived it, himself, and paid for it as he went along.

"You cold devil!" Alec whispered hoarsely. "I know why you let him get killed! I know what you're up to! You're a hunted man in a tight spot, and you think you see a chance here for yourself. You wanted to make sure of getting his badge, so that you can turn your blasted guns loose and then set yourself up as the man who brought law to Rainbow! The mayor and the reverend and the council—you'd get in solid with them, fool them, get them to worshiping you, put your cursed spell on them as you've already done to—to somebody else! And then—"

"Young man,' broke in the reverend sternly, "please—"

But Alec rushed on with his blistering accusation. "With people like these behind you, speaking for you, making a hero of you, the governor might change his mind! Might believe you've turned over a new leaf, and call off his men. Then you'd be sitting pretty, wouldn't you? You'd have this town—have it in your fist, like Solary's got it now! You'd have everything you've got your eye on! Kingpin of Rainbow. Yes, and you'd pick it to the bones before you're through with it, take what you wanted from it and throw away the leavings! Well, I'll put a spoke in that!"

He whirled toward the mayor and councilmen. "I want my dad's job —right now!"

"Y'know," Devlin remarked, unruffled, "you get pretty good ideas for a young fellow. Not bad at all. I'll think that over!"

Mayor Peattie evaded the hot young eyes. "Now, Alec," he protested. "You're young, an' you got no experience. Anyway, your own dad gave Devlin his badge, an' you saw him do it. He knew it's a job for a gun-fighting town tamer, not an . . . uh . . . amateur, so to speak."

The reverend, still stern from his experience with violent death, laid a hand on Devlin's sleeve. "I am going to try to do what he wanted done," he stated quietly. "We must have law before we can hope for anything else."

The little man meant every word

of it. He'd walk out there and get himself beaten up or killed for his principles. There was a high, steadfast courage in him, founded upon an ideal. Devlin pinned the badge to his lapel.

"Reverend," he murmured, "for a peaceful little pilgrim, you can deal me more trouble than the Texas Rangers! Bourne, hang another gun on yourself. Seeing you're so hot to bite somebody, I'm making you my deputy! What's that paper you're waving, mayor?"

"A copy of the town bylaws."

"Yeah? What's the first law on it?"

"'Thou shalt not kill!'" said the reverend.

"Hm-m-m? Here, let me see that list!"

"You will not find it there," rejoined the reverend. "I mean, if we must have violence, let it be only in self-defense. That badge is not a license to kill. Do you agree?"

Devlin didn't exactly, but he shaped his course to his company. "We'll let the Concordia crowd take a vote on that," he hedged. "You stay here, reverend. C'mon, Bourne, let's get to work!"

He was first out into the street, and he struck directly for the Concordia, his long legs striding fast, his ranging gaze whipping at all points. "Shoot when you have to, but don't scatter your lead," he muttered briefly to Alec. "Take your time, make sure of your man, an' don't get rattled if he's blazing at you. You'll last longer!"

It was a primary hint in gun technique from master to pupil, and young Bourne, recognizing it as such, accepted it with a nod despite his unrelenting hostility.

"I'm siding you in this, Devlin," Alex said thinly. "I'll go all the way with you. But when we're through, if we're still alive, we're going to have a showdown! You'll have to kill me, to take this town—or to take that girl—and when you do that, it'll sure show you up for what you are!"

"Pull your guns, an' shut up!" grunted Devlin. "Here goes!"

He kicked the batwing doors wide open before him, and they stamped into the Concordia. The swift suddenness of it all was no accidental impulse on Devlin's part. A fighting man, he had a thorough appreciation of the element of surprise.

Chairs scraped noisily and a pile of poker chips spilled to the floor. Men at the long mahogany bar banged down their glasses and spun around. Stampede Solary, at a table with the Brindle Kid and Blackfoot Roen, shot to his feet with the rest. His keen face twitched, and for an instant his eye flickered like blue flames. But this was a man with his temper and emotions enslaved by a strong intellect. He sat down again, slowly, and with the return of control he was again impassive and faintly mocking.

Devlin's hands were on his crossed belts, spreading open his long black coat. He was a Colt king, and reminding them of it. Purposely arrogant, domineering, his harsh voice

cracked at them. "Line up, you two-bit bad men—the law's here!"

His right hand slipped through a rapid motion, and a gun appeared in it and thudded once. A house dealer, sitting alone with a solitaire game spread at this slack hour, bowed his head and drew his hands from beneath the table.

"Watch out for that bartender, Bourne," Devlin warned. "He ducked under the bar, an' I don't figure he's getting us a drink!"

Alec paced toward the bar. "Show yourself, Hugo! Show yourself or—" He fired, and Hugo, peering around the far end of the bar, over a shotgun, lost his weapon and got his face full of splinters.

"Nice shot," Devlin commented, and decided that young Bourne had possibilities in him. "We'll jail that one! You haven't got those bylaws with you, huh? Never mind, we'll make up our laws as we go along! First—no gambling allowed. It's demoralizing to honest ambition!"

He threw a shot at a faro layout. The faro box, struck squarely, whirred through the air, shedding cards in its flight. He put a hole through a green baize dice table, blew the dice cup apart, and shot up a roulette wheel. And still Solary sat doing nothing, dead-panned, making no sign to his hirelings and saloon satellites. Devlin was disappointed. What he'd come for was a blazing fight and an excuse to settle matters with Solary, the Kid and Roen. What he wanted was a town roughly cleaned up in a hurry. He had drawn and used only one gun, and now he paused to reload it, tempting them to take a chance while he was thus occupied.

But they were not to be tempted. They knew all about the other gun under his coat, and with what blinding speed it could leap out. And Alec's shot at the bartender had been fast enough to impress them. For perhaps the first time, Alec Bourne was being eyed as a dangerous man, and he had two guns out.

Devlin snapped the cylinder shut on his gun with a flirt of his wrist. He let the hammer down on a shell, and the big back-bar mirror suffered. The next bullet took care of the front window. The barroom crowd breathed hard, and the Brindle Kid began to show his teeth, but Stampede Solary deftly rolled himself a cigarette and lighted it as if nothing were happening.

"I'm out to break you, Solary!" Devlin informed the Concordia owner.

"I'm a patient man, Devlin," was all Solary said, and went on smoking.

"Bourne, is this place licensed?" Devlin queried. "No? All right, Solary, that'll cost you another church donation. A thousand dollars. Pay up!"

He was annoyed when Solary carefully counted out the money and laid it down. Bourne collected it and tucked it away. Devlin played another card. "Now I'm takin' your license away for lettin' a man get shot in here! Bar's closed. Open it, serve one drink, an' I'll burn the damned joint down! *Sabe?* Bourne,

what else does this tinhorn own?"

"The Double S Hotel, the Star Dance Hall, the—"

"*Bueno!* Let's see what good we can do to *them!*"

They backed out, and at Devlin's last sight of him, Solary was blowing smoke rings and smiling faintly.

VI

Returning from putting the blight upon everything in town under the ownership of Solary—and obtaining therefrom no satisfactory fatalities—Devlin thought of Solary's placer workings on Contention Creek.

"What's this about Solary robbing you of those placer workings?" he asked Alec. They were stalking alertly along the main street, scanned wide-eyed from behind windows. Rainbow had not undergone such a devastating plague of law in all its history, not even in its pre-Concordia era, and it was somewhat dazed.

Alec sent Devlin a censorious stare. "I knew you'd get gold on your mind before long! What I said still stands!"

"It's beginning to," Devlin affirmed thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right, at that. Maybe my chance is right here in this town. Well, I'm a gambler. I play the cards as they come. Take my advice an' don't get in my way!"

"I meant what I said, Devlin! You're doing a big job, and that's all right. But when you try to take over this town for yourself, you'll have to kill me first!"

Devlin shifted his cigar and spat. "Too bad. Now tell me about those workings."

"Part of the creek belonged to my dad, from when he was in cattle," Alec recounted. "I found placer gold on it, and for a while I worked it on a small scale, with a homemade sluice box. But there's heavy black sand mixed in that creek dirt, and it clogs the riffle board. I couldn't separate the gold dust from it at first, but I finally hit on a way. Gold is heavier than lead, but the black sand isn't, so I used molten lead as a separator. Just fed the concentrate—the black sand and gold—into a pot of hot lead. Sure enough, the gold dust sank to the bottom, leaving the black sand floating on top where I could scrape it off. All I had to do then was cool the hot lead, saw off the bottom, and I had a chunk of practically pure gold, see?"

"You do get ideas," observed Devlin. "How did Solary bust you?"

Alec shrugged. "He was new here, and I didn't know he was crooked. He offered to put up the cash for a big gold-washer and recovery outfit like my little one. I got my dad to give him the title to that land, to hold as security on the loan. Soon's I'd got the outfit built, somebody blew it up one night. Solary, of course. I couldn't pay back his loan, then, so he took the property, built another outfit just like mine, brought in gunmen to work and guard it, and now he owns the town. More gold was found farther along the creek, and it started a rush,

but Solary rules the roost. The little wildcat miners have to sell their black-sand concentrate to him at his price, and he recovers the gold from it with my idea, at a whale of a profit. Any time a wildcat miner strikes a rich deposit, Solary's thugs rig a fight on him and take his workings. Everybody knows what's going on, but nobody's been able to do anything about it."

They were coming abreast of the Concordia. Solary stood on the low porch, and with exaggerated politeness he inclined his head to them. "Had a busy morning . . . ah . . . gentlemen?"

"Fair," said Devlin. "You're closed up all over town. Open any place o' yours, an' we burn it!"

Solary gestured unconcernedly. "I think I can afford to lose business for a day or two." He smiled, but his eyes were like marble. He let his voice sink to a monotone. "And I can well afford to outwait you, Devlin! You've got to go soon. You can't last! I'll give you no excuse to gun me. When the trigger fools are dead, and you're gone, I'll still be here to ramrod this town! You're a fighting tiger, Devlin, but patience is one thing you can't fight and beat!" He bowed again, and turned back into his empty saloon.

"Darned if I don't believe he's on the right track!" Alec allowed grudgingly.

Devlin nodded. "Yeah. But maybe we can rig a collision on him yet!"

They entered the Bourne house, and it was silent. The mayor and councilmen had departed, and the Topcliffs had apparently gone with them.

"I guess they expected trouble to bust out, and took to cover," speculated Alec.

But Devlin's mind was tackling a problem and getting a hold on it. Right now he wasn't interested in the comings and goings of municipal or spiritual fathers, or their daughters, either.

"Listen," he said. "Those wildcat miners oughtn't to have any special liking for Solary, from what you say. Now, you take a pasear down the creek an' here an' yon. Spread the word that I'm organizing a vigilante company to protect their interests an' fight Solary to a standstill!"

Alec's head came up. "By thunder, I could pretty near admire you, Devlin!" he vowed. "So now it's vigilantes, is it? 'To protect their interests,' huh? To help *your* interests, more like it! It'll make you the head of a regular law army, won't it? You're sure building your fences against the coming of the storm!"

Devlin eyed him absently, hardly listening, mentally shaping up what he hoped would be a whirlwind campaign that would either free him of this town or make the town his. "What're you waiting for?" he demanded. "Get busy—pronto!"

They began coming in small groups, the volunteer vigilantes, some nervous, some belligerent, but

all hopeful that Stampede Solary's day was going into eclipse. The high-handed shutting down of Solary's various town businesses had made a tremendous impression. The talk already had it that the law was moving into Rainbow, guided and spurred by a mild little clergyman who had reformed the most notorious long rider in the territory and placed him on the side of the law. The wildcat miners were perfectly amenable to climbing aboard the winning side, provided that they could see sufficient evidence that it would, without fail, be winner.

And Preacher Devlin looked like a winner, big and tough, his knee-length coat and wide-brimmed black hat giving him a strangely arresting air of somber austerity, and with a reputation higher than Hangman's Peak. So they crowded into the house and looked expectantly to him to produce a few miracles, preferably with Solary's scalp attached thereto. He looked them over, and he thought them pretty run-of-the-mill material. But these were the cards upon which he had to stake everything, win or lose, and he had to play his hand out to a finish. It had to be done today, and quickly at that. It would be only a matter of hours now before the governor's hunters closed in.

There had been no possibility of keeping this vigilante movement a secret from the Concordia crowd. News of it was all over town. They were saying that the Preacher and the little reverend were going to lead them into a kind of war of salvation, that they would clean out the town, and give it law and a church. Meantime, Solary and the Concordia crowd showed no signs of making a move, and Devlin liked that least of all.

Mayor Peattie and his three councilmen arrived last, with a few more placer miners and old citizens trailing after them. Alec, beginning to look worried, inquired about the Topcliffs.

The mayor shook his head. "They ain't been with us. They were here when we left, soon after you went out to tend to Solary. The reverend ought to be here, time like this. Maybe they're fixing their wagon. He said something about taking the wagon box off, so he could haul lumber for the—"

"Say, Devlin!" called a man at the door. "Everybody says you've clamped down tight on Solary, but it sure don't look that way! Why, his Star Dance Hall is wide open! An' listen to that piano goin' full blast! Huh!"

There was a general move toward the door, and a lot of muttered comment. The Star was open, sure enough, and nothing private about it. Devlin narrowed his eyes a little. Something was in the wind, and Solary was raising it. This was direct and open defiance, a challenge. It had to be handled at once, or the amateur vigilantes would waver, lose confidence, and drop away. A strong hand had to be shown here. Devlin jerked his head at Alec.

"Come on, deputy!"

They entered the Star, the vigi-

lantes strung out behind them. There wasn't much of a crowd inside; just the Solary men, and spangled girls who belonged here. But the bar was open, and a fellow was banging the piano, and there was some dancing.

Solary was on the floor. He was dancing with a girl whose head came only as high as his shoulder. It was a waltz that they were doing, sedately enough. Solary must have heard the tramping boots of the incoming party, but he danced the girl gracefully around, and when she completed a half circle, those entering could see her face.

It was Faith Topcliff.

Devlin heard Alec make a sound as if gagging on hot chili, and a few startled grunts came from the miners. Solary, feigning to notice the newcomers for the first time, left the girl and came sauntering over. "Greetings, gentlemen!"

"What's she doing in here?" Alec blazed at him.

"Who? Oh—the Topcliff girl." Solary polished his fingernails. "She wants to work for me, so I'm trying out her dancing."

"You damned liar! Where's the reverend?"

Solary laughed softly. "Haven't you heard? Ah, well, the law is always last to hear of the crime!" He glanced over the huddle of miners. "The so-called *Rev.* Topcliff has skipped town with the . . . ah . . . church funds! Yes, Devlin, your pious little accomplice in crime sneaked out on you and took the loot with him!"

"You liar!" Alec called him again, white-faced. "It's crazy! He wouldn't desert his daughter, in any case!"

"Don't worry; she knows her way around." Solary murmured, and twisted his lips cynically. "How do you know she's his daughter?" he sneered, and dodged as Alec swung at him.

Solary was fast. He eluded the blow, and darted a hand to his hip, but brought it away empty after a lightning look at Devlin. "You poor fools!" he spat at the miners. "So you'd let yourselves be taken in by a pious little crook, and a gun-slinging outlaw on the make, and an innocent-faced little—"

Devlin swung this time, and he didn't miss. He nearly stood Solary on his head, and then he flipped out a gun. When nobody took him up on that, he reached up and yanked down one of the ornate brass ceiling lamps. He crashed the lamp to the floor, broke its oil reservoir with his heel, and took out a match.

"I'm burnin' down this joint, as I promised!" he growled, and set light to the spilled oil. "Outside, everybody, or cook!" With one blaze started, he went through the dance hall setting others, while the crowd fought their way out in a hurry.

When Devlin emerged, he found himself between a flaming dance hall and an angry mob. The wildcat miners were in an ugly state of mind.

Disillusioned, regarding themselves as having been duped, they were venting their bitter abuse on the nearest scapegoat handy, who happened to be Faith.

The girl was in the midst of them, and they were accusing her of being things she'd never even heard of, and fixing worse names onto the absent reverend. Solary, still groggy from Devlin's clout, was being supported by some of his men. He was motioning toward the girl, and mumbling through broken teeth, trying to get it across to his men that he wanted the girl taken in off the street. Blackfoot Roen and a bouncer named Otto got the idea and started for her, but Alec reared up from somewhere under the crowd's feet and he was ahead of them.

Devlin took a forward step, but paused as he saw Alec fighting his way to Faith. It was better, that way. Let young Bourne loom big in the girl's eyes, for a change. He watched Alec slam down a hefty miner who disputed his way, decided that the young man was qualified to take care of himself, and transferred his attention to Roen and Otto. Those two were plowing toward the girl from a different direction. A miner, shaking a finger in the frightened face of the girl and hollering at the top of his voice, quit suddenly as Alec got there and landed on him. Alec caught hold of the girl, and she clung to him as to a lone savior in a world gone berserk. A roar went up and the crowd pressed tighter. Mob violence was breaking loose, mad and unreasoning.

Smoke from the burning building rolled over their heads, but did nothing to cool them off. Alec was battling all comers now, trying to hold a space for the girl. Blackfoot Roen and Otto, having got as far as they could through the jammed pack, drew their guns and lashed out with the barrels. They shoved on, and Otto, rising up on his toes, bobbed his round head sidewise for a better view of Alec, and attempted to take aim at him.

Alec had got about as far as he was going to get with his rescue, single-handed. Devlin didn't figure to leave him there, but he didn't incline toward joining him, either. He pitched one shot at Otto, and two into the mass of legs nearest him. The bouncer took no further interest in lining his sights on Alec, but the crowd held him wedged, and for a while he was like a man sleeping on his feet. Somebody yelped with a bullet burn on his foot, and another man fell out of the pack, hopping on one leg. Three more rapping reports and the mob split apart, permeated by a sudden instinct for self-preservation. Alec came charging out of the ruckus with Faith practically carried under one arm.

"Head for home with her, boy, where she belongs!" Devlin sang out, and came down off the dance-hall porch. He hit and broke through the crowd like a thunderbolt and caught up with Alec and Faith. The three of them were piling into the

Bourne house by the time shots began cracking from the Solary squad.

"Well, there goes our law army! Fort up, Bourne; lock the rear!" Devlin slammed the front door and bolted it. "Here they come—Solary's boys an' those damned vigilante mutineers!"

Alec returned fast from locking the rear. "Wonder where the mayor and council have gone?"

"Who gives a hoot?" grunted Devlin. "Cussed town's exploded, right in my face! Girl, you sure proved good ammunition for Solary, an' he knew how to use it." He stared dourly at Faith. "Stay out o' dance halls after this! Where's your father?"

Faith crept closer to Alec. "He's. . . . They've got him in that thing they call a dragline bucket . . . right over a big pot of hot lead, they said!" she gasped.

Devlin spat out the chewed remnant of his unlighted cigar. "Hell of a place for a parson!" he muttered, and cut loose through the front door as somebody crashed a rock against it.

VII

The mob of misled miners had gone completely wild, egged on and abetted by Solary's men, who were doing most of the shooting. Windows began caving in, and Devlin got down on one knee. He spaced his shots fast, and the pair of kicking guns in his hands filled the house with their rapid roar. Reloading, he listened to the sounds outside and analyzed them. The miners, evidently losing some of their crazy belligerence in the face of that two-gun salvo, were being whipped up afresh by the Concordia bunch. Devlin could hear them being reminded of big bounty, of the reverend's alleged treachery, and of what would happen to them now if a certain long rider got the upper hand.

Alec had been talking hurriedly with Faith, and he crawled over the floor to Devlin. "We've got to get out of here!" he exclaimed. "We've got to get to the creek!"

Devlin snapped shut his loaded guns. "That's a constructive idea! How'd the reverend get himself into that dragline bucket?"

"They tricked him," Alec explained. "Faith says she and her father were trying to take the wagon box off their wagon, so they could use the wagon bed and team to haul lumber for the church. The Brindle Kid and some others came over and helped. Said they were sorry for what happened last night and wanted to make amends. And the reverend believed them!"

"He would!"

"Then they offered to show him where there was a lot of cut lumber he could have, and he went off with them to look at it. He had the team hitched up and wanted to drive there, but they said the timber was down in the creek and would have to be snaked out first. Later, Otto came and told Faith that her father was in some trouble and Solary wanted to see her about

it. She ran over to Solary, and he told her that the Brindle Kid was threatening to burn her father alive!"

"Didn't even incriminate himself, huh?" Devlin scowled. "That hombre's just too careful to live!"

"The Brindle Kid's got the reverend tied up in that big dragline bucket, Solary told Faith," Alec rushed on. "They've got it right over the hot-lead recovery outfit, and that big bucket's got a trap-drop bottom: just a jerk of a rope throws it open. They can drop him in any time!"

"An' that'd be the end o' the reverend—bone, hide an' hair!" Devlin appended grimly. "Wouldn't be a smudge left of him in that melted lead. He'd just vanish. So Solary held that over the girl, an' made her dance to his tune, huh?"

"Sure. He said he could stop the Brindle Kid, if she'd do as he told her. He made her go into the Star, waited till the miners gathered here, then pulled that stunt on us. Faith didn't dare speak up, on account of her father. Devlin, we've got to get to the creek! We've got to!"

Devlin could appreciate the necessity of that, without it being yelled in his ear. He realized, too, the length to which Solary would be prepared to go to keep the truth of the reverend's disappearance from getting out. Letting Faith get out of his hands after the dance-hall frame-up had been the only slip Solary had made so far, and that had been due to his grogginess from a healthy slam in the teeth. Right now, the only bright spot in the picture for Devlin was his remembrance of getting in that clout. He fired through a broken window at the alley across the way, and drew in exchange a spattering hail that sent him closer to the floor.

"Well, we can't take root here, that's certain," he allowed. "Get to the back, you two, an' duck out that way if the chance comes."

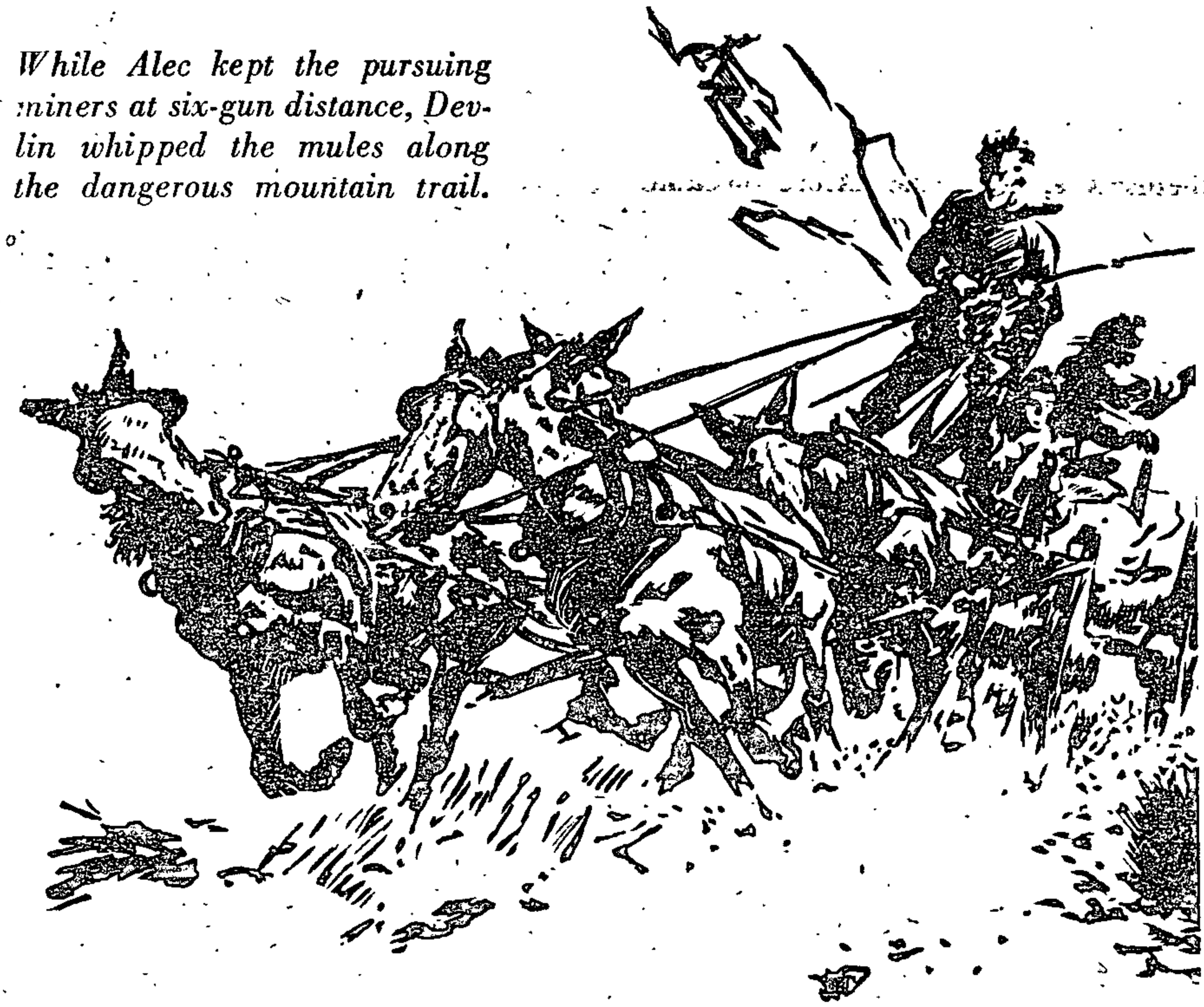
"How would a chance come?" Alec wanted to know. "This house is covered from all—" He paused at the glimmer in Devlin's eyes. "Man! You're not stepping out there to—"

"This is no time for explanations!" Devlin barked at him. "Do as I tell you—get!"

They left for the rear, and Devlin moved over to the couch, where the body of Old Alec still lay covered with a blanket. He had a notion that what he was about to do might meet with objections from Alec, if the young man saw it. Some folks were inclined to be squeamish about their dead. Sentiment was all right in its proper place, but Devlin didn't consider that it should be allowed to stand in the way of more realistic values.

Still, as he dressed the body in his own hat and coat, he voiced a concession to cenventional taste. "No disrespect to you, old-timer," he muttered. "You just happen to be needed for one more job. All things considered, I reckon you wouldn't mind givin' a hand here."

While Alec kept the pursuing miners at six-gun distance, Devlin whipped the mules along the dangerous mountain trail.



He carried the body to the front door, and pulled back the bolt.

The opening of the door threw the noise of the street into a tense moment of waiting hush. Except for the scrape and rustle of men scrambling to closer cover, the sounds of the town dwindled to less than normal, lacking even the steady rumble of Solary's power-driven concentrator from down along the creek.

Then the figure appeared—inside the opened door—long-coated body in a crouch, black-hatted head bent forward. Close to its sides a pair of guns opened up with a thudding burst, and the narrow margin of silence was shattered. From every vantage point along the street, shots poured at the lone, menacing figure. The pounding impact of the bullets could be heard striking it, and it lurched over and fell asprawl across the doorstep.

"Got him! The Preacher's down!"

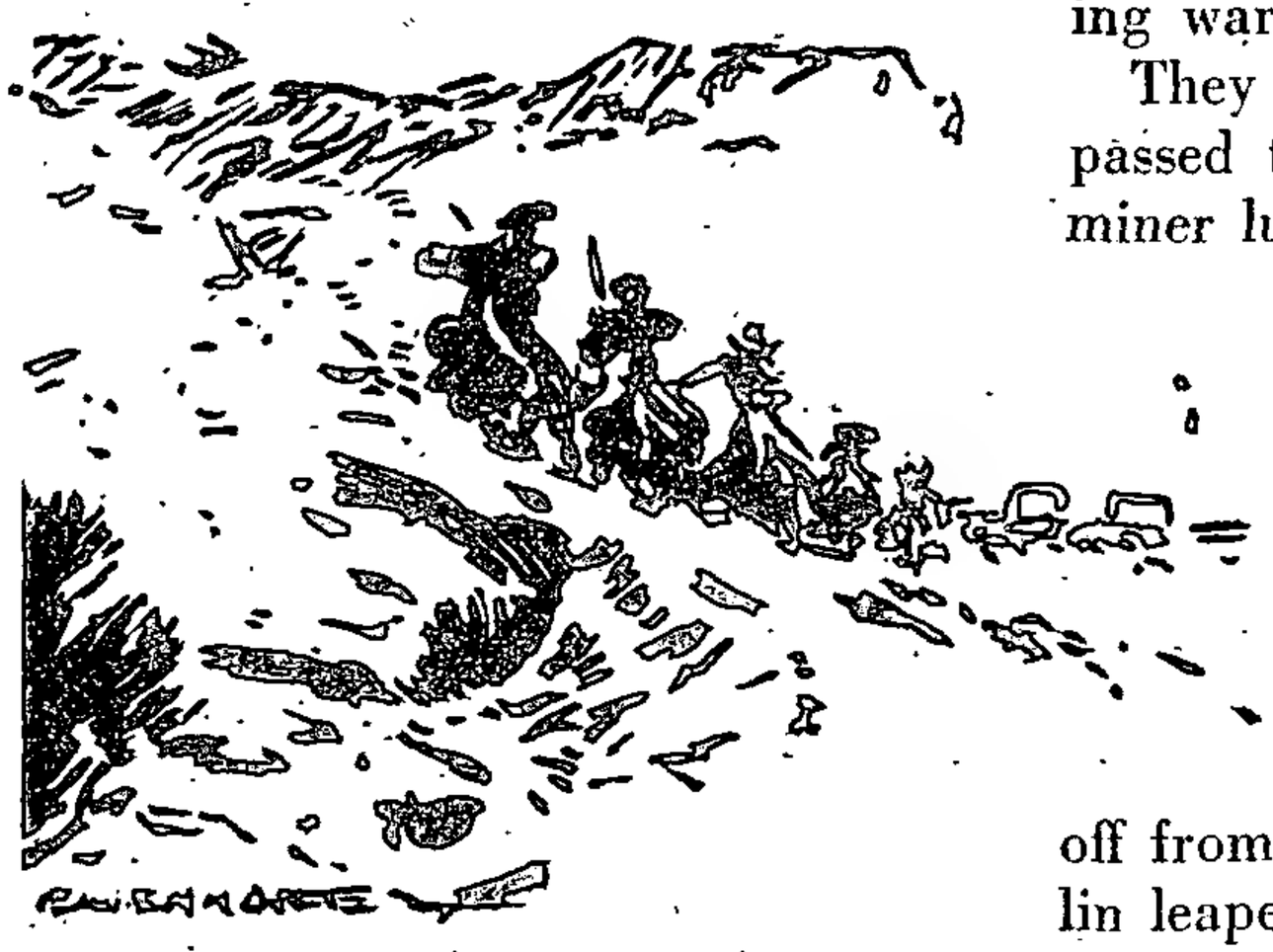
The exultant cry rose to a clamor up and down the street, reaching to all parts of the town. It was echoed by fighters and neutrals alike, and relayed by those out of sight of the deed.

"The Preacher's down!"

Men swarmed from cover, eying the stilled figure, and laughing with a tinny, nervous ring from their sudden letdown of tension. Others came running from all quarters to see for themselves, and the street became the convergent tryst for the town, its focal point the fallen man.

Alec was easing out via the back door, with Faith, when Devlin came up behind him.

"Devlin!" Alec gulped. "But . . .



but they're all yelling that you're killed! Listen to 'em!"

"I never listen to rumors. Come on, let's head for that wagon!" With the long reach of his legs, Devlin led the way. Stripped of his ministerial coat and hat, he looked somewhat younger despite the flecks of gray over his temples; and yet he seemed even taller, more lithe and powerful—a man panther with smooth muscles rippling under a white shirt that darkened his hard and sardonic face by contrast. The sunlight winked on the polished butts of his guns in their strapped-down holsters, and on the double loops of brass shells studding the broad black leather of his crossed belts.

And even now Alec Bourne flinched a little to see Faith's candid and impressionable young eyes fixed on that masterful, virile animal of a man. It was a case of helpless fascination. The girl could see nobody else whenever that gun-fighting warrior was around.

They tore through the back yard, passed the fence, and a slow-footed miner lumbering for the street shied off from them with a shrill yell. Devlin leaped and struck him down, but the harm was done. The yell had caught the attention of other tardy ones who hadn't yet reached the street, and these looked back to discover the cause.

A shout went up. "Hey, everybody! They're gettin' out through the—"

Another shout, this time from the street, cut across the alarm. "Hell. this ain't Devlin layin' here!"

The mules were as the reverend had left them when he went off with the Brindle Kid, harnessed and hitched to the skeleton frame of the

wagon bed, ready to haul lumber. They were cocking their ears at the noise, and they rolled wicked eyes snakily at Devlin as he raced toward them. Having been spoiled by the reverend's coaxing methods, they planted their legs stubbornly as Devlin sprang over a front wheel and scooped up the lines. But the Preacher wasn't in any kind of coaxing humor. He barely gave Alec and Faith time to scramble aboard before bringing the whip down with a whistling crack, and he spoke words familiar to the ears of any hardened mule.

The mules took off like scared cats, and the wagon bed bounced and swayed over the rough ground, its three riders clinging to it. Men came spilling from between buildings lining the street. Devlin chopped a shot at a Solary group, and flattened out on the jolting frame to attend to his driving. A stake and rider fence loomed up dead ahead, inclosing somebody's vegetable garden, but the Preacher was in too much of a hurry to go around it. He put a gap in the fence and a scarred track across the garden, smashed the team through the next fence, and got it headed in the direction of the creek.

The creek was empty of miners, and no faces stared up at the wagon careening along the rim trail, but a knot of men lounging at the foot of the promontory on the far side jumped up to scan it. Devlin recognized one of them as the Brindle Kid, and the others as some of the guards he had seen before around Solary's gold-recovery outfit. At their backs, atop the promontory, stood the recovery outfit, the flue of the firebox pouring smoke, and the dragline bucket suspended ready for its contents to be dumped into the short chute leading into the mammoth lead pot.

There had been no way of coming up on that side of the creek with the wagon, for no trail ran there and the ground was cut by arroyos. To take it on foot would not have been possible. Even with the running mules and lightened wagon, they had made it up the rim trail only a jump ahead of pursuit. Every man able to get hold of a horse was coming tearing out from town in the dusty wake of the wagon. Alec was looking back and throwing long shots, trying to discourage pursuit.

But Devlin was sending looks at another band of horsemen, coming up from the south and changing their course to head off the wagon. They rode in the manner of men with a purpose, and he thought of lawmen and bounty hunters. He braced himself and hauled on the lines when nearly above the power-driven concentrator on the bench, opposite the rocky promontory. Wrenching and sawing, he forced the mules to a standstill. By that time the band of horsemen was riding up close. They had the stamp of cattlemen, but were all heavily armed, and Devlin saw Mayor Peattie and the councilmen among them.

"Where you going, Devlin?"

Peattie shouted. He waved an arm at the riders with him. "It looked like a riot when we left, but we ran into these fellows coming in to see—"

"We aim to join this here vigilante comp'ny we've heard about," broke in a cowman impatiently. "Where is it?"

"Coming up the pike, looking for my scalp!" Devlin grunted. Plucking a rifle from the nearest rider, he took quick aim over the creek. The Brindle Kid and the others with him were running up the promontory. They could see the crowd pouring up the rim trail from town, and the cowmen, and they evidently figured that it was high time to dispose of the reverend. One of them, well ahead of the rest, reached for the piece of rope dangling from the trapdrop floor of the dragline bucket.

Devlin's rifle cracked, fetching up rattling echoes from down in the deep cleft of the creek. The reaching man missed his grab, and stumbled on around the brick firebox without trying again. Devlin levered a fresh shell into the breech.

"Take these hombres an' try holding that mob back for a spell!" he called to Peattie. "Watch out for Solary's boys among 'em!"

Alec was sliding down the steep bank to the wide bench below. "I'm going over on the dragline! Keep me covered, Devlin!"

Devlin nodded after him. "Don't let go," he warned. "It's a long drop down!"

The mayor gaped bewilderedly. "What's Alec gonna do that for?" he blurted.

"The Kid's got the reverend in that bucket, an' aims to give him a hot bath!" Devlin answered curtly, and squeezed the rifle trigger again. Another running man veered away from the dangling length of rope, and tottered a few more steps before falling. The Brindle Kid and the two left with him dropped down and began snaking their way toward their goal, taking advantage of every dip and hollow in the short course they had to traverse.

The mayor emitted a squeak of horror at the news, then he and his horse were swallowed up and borne along by the spurring cowmen. The band of riders went clattering on along the rim to stall off the town mob and appeared happy to do it. Rainbow had been a good cow town before the coming of Solary's crowd and the wildcat miners. Between the cowmen of the locality and the present citizens' majority of Rainbow there was an abiding animosity, so far held down to a simmer by the cowmen because of lack of numbers and opportunity to do anything about it.

The dragline—high above the creek bed, and running from the concentrator on the bench to the recovery outfit on the far side—began jerking and dancing under Alec's weight. He was going it hand over hand, while Faith crouched by the wagon and watched him fixedly.

Devlin, on one knee and the rifle to his shoulder, wasted no shells. The rifle was a heavy, seven-shot

repeater, far more reliable than a six-gun for the job at hand. The Preacher had four shells left in the magazine and one in the breech, and three men yonder to account for. The three men had learned caution, but they were in a hurry to finish what they had to do. Devlin whipped a shot at a leg, and the owner rolled into sight, gathered impetus until helpless to stop himself, and his shriek was long and shuddery as he hurtled off the edge of the high bank down to the stony creek bed below.

The Brindle Kid and his one remaining companion got up and made a rush over the last few yards. The rifle spoke again, and then the Brindle Kid was ducking and zigzagging alone, but he made it around the firebox and out of sight. One of his arms was in a sling, but he still had one good hand and a gun, and from behind the firebox his gun spat a tiny ball of smoke. It was tricky shooting for a short gun, but his bullet nicked the steel-strand dragline and set it humming. Alec continued his slow advance without pause, hand over hand, but the strain on his muscles could be seen to be slowing him down.

Devlin laid a bullet on the edge of the firebox and knocked a brick to chips and powder. For a moment no other move came from the Kid. Then his arm began darting upward, snatching at the piece of rope under the dragline bucket. He touched it once and set it swinging. It was just a little out of his reach, and he was trying to avoid leaving his arm exposed long enough to make a target, but he was bound to get his fingers around that rope sooner or later.

Alec got above solid ground, and let go. He hit the ground, tumbled, got up, and advanced on the firebox. He dodged as the Kid's gun bobbed around the bricks and thudded at him, and threw a return shot that missed. The Kid had all the advantage of cover.

Devlin estimated angles; and lined his sights on a spot underneath the slanted iron chute that served as a feed hopper for the recovery outfit. He fired. With the clang of the iron chute, a streak of molten lead spurted from the pot, kicked up by the ricochet bullet plumping into it. There was a thin howl, and the Brindle Kid leaped up from behind the firebox, clasping and clawing at his face. With the last bullet in the rifle, Devlin dropped him back again.

Then Devlin watched Alec climb up and lift the trussed figure of the little reverend out of the dragline bucket, and he listened to the sudden roar of the mob along the rim trail as they saw that. He glanced down at the expression on Faith's face, and again at Alec with the reverend. And he thought it damnable that there was gold over yonder, that he was here on this side, and that Stampede Solary still lived.

VIII

Stampede Solary rested both hands on the bar of his Concordia Saloon.

He said softly: "You've downed my best men, kicked the works over, and got everybody shouting for you, Devlin! All right, you've got this town in your fist—but for how long?"

It was growing dark, and the lamps were lighted in the Concordia. Blackfoot Roen sat at a table by himself, doing nothing, saying nothing. Men sat around other tables, as idle and unmoving as Blackfoot. No drinks were being served, and no games played.

Preacher Devlin, his usual saturnine self once more in his long, black coat and hat, retrieved from Alec Bourne's body, helped himself from a cigar box and threw down a dollar. "I may be around for quite a while," he mentioned. "The reverend, the mayor an' council, the cowmen and even all the miners—they're all ready to side me against the governor. They're ready to swear I cleaned up this town an' it can't get along without me. Maybe you better pull stakes, Solary!"

Solary smiled, shaking his head. "You can't pin a thing on me. My bar's closed and so are the games. I'm in line with the law to the last inch. I'll go on playing it that way, and I'll make no errors. Can you say the same thing for yourself? You're the kingpin of Rainbow right now, yes—but only just so long as you tread a tight law line! Step off that line, and you're out! You know that. You've clamped more law onto this town than you can live by, yourself! Some day you'll break loose. All this is only a flash in the pan. I'm a patient man, as I've said before. I won't have so long to wait. You'll be just a memory—but I'll be the real thing again!"

With a cigar between his teeth, Devlin strolled out, and Solary called mockingly after him: "Maybe you better pull stakes, Preacher!"

To himself, Devlin admitted that Solary held a pretty good ace card, there. Played that way, it would take a long time to dislodge Solary and make the town permanently safe for the reverend and other peaceful folks like him. Solary knew how to wait and keep his hands clean, pending the time when he could reach out and take hold of Rainbow again. And the longer that time was delayed, the more coldly virulent would be his vengeance on those who had worked against him. His patience was of that kind, keeping sharp the cutting edge of his cruelty and his lust for power.

On the street, Devlin found himself joined by the reverend, Faith and Alec. As if reading the gun fighter's mood, the reverend spoke of Solary. "He is a menace to the peace of this town," he conceded. "But he is afraid of you, and he'll commit no harm as long as you are here. You'll stay, won't you? Whatever has happened in your past is done and gone, and we are all very willing to make it possible for you to remain here."

That same idealistic glow was in his eyes, promising determined help

in reformation. And that different look, that soft shine, came creeping back into Faith's eyes. It seemed to come back without her consent, for she was very young, so young that fascination could bewilder her into believing it was something deeper—so young that she did not know how to control its coming or its unpredictable consequences.

"Please stay!" she said, and the words were involuntary, containing more in their tone than in their bare meaning.

And then at last the reverend looked at his daughter, a little startled at first, then sharply, and finally with dismay. In an unnatural voice he said to Alec: "Will you please see Faith home?"

Alec nodded stiffly. "Sure." He, too, had witnessed the fleeting recurrence of that look.

They walked off, and the reverend said, looking after them: "I like to see those two together. I believe they love each other, and will discover it soon—if nothing blinds them off the natural path. All they need is a chance. That would be best, wouldn't it?"

Devlin nodded. "Yeah, that'd be all right. G'night, reverend." He strode off, leaving the churchman gazing troubledly after him.

An hour later the swing doors of the Concordia parted wide open, nearly torn off their hinges by a hefty kick. They flapped back again, slapped the kicker before he cleared them, and for a brief spell he got tangled up with them. A growled oath, a protesting shriek of mangled hinges, and one of the doors went sailing into the street while its mate came banging and sliding over the barroom floor.

Solary jerked up straight, Blackfoot Roen scraped back his chair, and the half dozen others in the barroom clumped to their feet. Their eyes widened and then narrowed, fastened on the tall, disheveled intruder standing spread-legged in the doorway. They needed nobody to tell them what this was. Here was a bad man on a whale of a bender, a curly wolf all lit up and hitting the high spots, celebrating a Colt coronation and kingship over everything within range of his shooters. It was an impressive sight.

Devlin's wide-brimmed ministerial hat was tipped at a rakish slant. His shirt collar was open, and the long coat was thrust back, hands shoved into the broad cartridge belts. He stood swaying gently, one black eyebrow up, the other down, taking survey of the saloon's interior.

"More life in a graveyard!" was his comment, and his voice was thick and slurred.

He removed one hand from his belts and stuck a thumb over his shoulder. "What the hell d'you want doors for, anyway? This joint's never closin' from here on, nor any other bottlery in my territory! This is my town, an' that's an order! Y'hear me? *My* town! Speak up, Solary—wherever the blazes you are!"

A bright gleam lighted Solary's eyes, but he spoke very civilly.

"Right, Preacher. Anything you say goes. I'm right here behind the bar."

Devlin placed one foot forward, teetered precariously, and it seemed likely that he would depart backward into the street, but the edge of the door frame saved him. After two false tries, he abandoned that support and found the bar.

"Best in the house for me!" he growled.

"Best in the house—*on* the house—for Preacher Devlin!" crooned Solary, and swiftly set it out.

Devlin got a hand on the bottle. "Don't you serve any glasses in this sorry, broken-down burro stable? he demanded.

"Sure. One right by your elbow," answered Solary.

Devlin located it, picked it up, scowled at it, and tossed it contemptuously over his shoulder. "Damned eye cup! Hand me somethin' man size. A beer glass!"

He filled the glass till it ran over, emptied it in two gulps, and with the bottle and glass in his hands he inclined at a list toward the nearest table, upsetting only two spittoons and a chair in his course. He royally waved off three men who already happened to be seated there, and they vacated.

"My town! Goin' to run you out o' business, Solary! Goin' to take over this place—every place. Run 'em right. Run 'em my way—" His head drooped. He roused himself, made a swipe for the bottle, missed getting it, and knocked it to the floor. The effort pitched him forward off balance, but when his head slumped onto the table he seemed to find it comfortable there, and left it that way.

Blackfoot Roen rose silently to his feet, his leaden, humorless eyes slanted inquiringly at Solary, his hands on his gun butts. The half dozen others also rose, nodding eagerly. Solary's narrow, clever face reflected a warring of thoughts and emotions. His eyes were bright with the urge of immediate opportunity. Patience was an excellent trick; it had always paid him well, and its use was in line with his careful principles for never taking any risk that could be avoided. But here was a single card that could be played to win at one stroke, right now and without risk. It was too tempting a chance to throw away. Patience lost. Solary nodded quickly and thrust a hand under his armpit.

"Let him have it!" he whispered.

A chair went flying. A table crashed over. A pair of eyes, gray as sleet and cold sober, glittered with saturnine mischief above a heavy pair of exploding, kicking guns.

By the time the town began taking stock, the Concordia was on fire. Mayor Peattie, coughing and spluttering, stumbled hastily out of the burning building after viewing the havoc inside, and his face was white.

"Four men dead in there!" he gasped to the crowd assembled outside. "Solary, Roen, Haff, Torbert and Escobio. The others went through a window, from the looks of it—and still running, likely!"

"No sign of Devlin?" rapped Colo-

nel Rorick: "Wonder where the devil he is?"

That question was soon answered by a wild whoop and a sudden stamping of hoofs. Mounted on his own big black horse, Devlin hit the street and shot down the emporium signboard by way of announcing his arrival. In the lurid glare of the burning Concordia, even his horse wore an air of reckless frolic, entering into the graceless spirit of things with skittish cavortings, prancing around, shaking its head and showing its heels. Drunk as he appeared, Devlin rode with the easy mastery of a consummate horseman. He put the big black full at the crowd, reined it broadside with a touch, and bowled over five miners who weren't as lively in their reactions as the rest of the crowd.

"Get out o' here, you worthless creek scrabblers! This is my town an' I'll have my fun with it! Mine, *sabe?* Tomorrow I'll be coming around to collect special taxes, first thing. Be ready to pay out if you don't want trouble! Now vamoose, the lot of you!"

He ran them off the street as if they were cattle, riding back and forth, twirling a rope and crowding them. They were manageable, and became more so when they saw the mayor and council bolting prudently for cover. With all the street his to operate in, Devlin, raising a long yell, lifted his horse onto the boardwalk and started up it at a rocking gallop.

Ducking the low-hanging signboards, hoofs hammering the loose planks, he shot out windows as he thundered by. At the far end of the street he took to the other side and came roaring back, guns blazing.

Mayor Peattie and the town council emerged with dubious authority from the store where they had taken cover. The mayor raised a hand, shaking a finger at Devlin and shouting something about law and order. Devlin shot off his hat as he careened by, and the mayor led the dash back into the store. On his next round, Devlin found one lone man waiting for him, standing planted doggedly in the street, two guns buckled on and his arms stiff as pokers at his sides.

Alec Bourne had learned something about gun technique and gunfighter temperament. He had learned it from the man he had come out to face.

"Pull up, Devlin!" he called crisply.

Devlin reined his plunging horse to a stamping, hoof-digging halt. He cuffed back his hat and leaned on the saddlehorn.

"How'ya, son!" he greeted young Alec Bourne blandly. "What brings you out?"

"If you're not too drunk, you'll remember what I said would have to be done, any time you made a grab to take over this town!" Alec's voice was even, though a little strained. "It's come sooner than I thought. You've kicked the lid off and showed yourself for what you

are, and it's gone about far enough!"

"Hell, I haven't started yet!" the Preacher claimed.

"You're through, Devlin! This is a law-abiding town, now. There's no place in it for a gun-fighting outlaw marshal who thinks he can use it for his private playground and shoot it up when he takes the notion! The mayor and council expect me to take away your badge, or trade smoke, trying! I'm here to try!" Alec expected to die, that was certain. And the watching town expected him to die. But he would go through with it, hoping to get in at least one shot at Devlin as he went down.

"I reckon Solary was right," Devlin said solemnly. "I brought more law to this town than I could live up to, myself. So they want me to quit, huh? Is that what the reverend says, too?"

"Yes!"

Devlin nodded. He plucked the badge from the lapel of his coat, and tossed it to Alec. It was the first time that he had ever backed down before any man's challenge, but he did it without regret. He drew a large envelope from his coat pocket.

"Here's something else you can have—your deed to that creek land. I took it from Solary's safe when I set fire to the Concordia. Got the key from his pocket. Seemed a waste to let that paper burn with the trash. S'long, son—an' good luck!"

He heeled the black and went clattering down the street and out of town, leaving Alec staring after him and the town in a buzz of astonishment.

Along the rim trail Devlin found the Rev. Topcliff, mounted on one of his mules, and he pulled up alongside.

"Sorry, reverend," he said gruffly. "I reckon you won't be seeing me in your Sunday congregation, after all."

Darkness made the reverend's face unfathomable. "Wherever you may go, I shall always see you in my congregation," he said quietly. "I wanted you to know that, before you left." He held out his right hand. "Good-by, good friend—and my blessings go with you for everything that you've done us here in Rainbow."

He might have kept that town in his fist, if he'd wanted it, and been its permanent kingpin, Devlin knew. Ah, well— He shrugged, and misquoted a line that came into his mind. "'Better a beggar on horseback, than catch the conscience of a tyrant!'"

Not quite a beggar, though. Not exactly. He patted a well-filled pocket. There had been other things in Stampede Solary's safe, besides the deed, which it would have been a waste to let burn with the trash.

THE END

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DEUCES WILD

Could Dan Jessup, the accordian-playing Mounty, make Tanned Hyde dance to the law's tune?

By Frank Richardson Pierce

I

INSPECTOR SHERIDAN of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police fumed. Another taunting message had arrived from Dismal Creek Post. Burned on a square of caribou hide, it read:

Sheridan:

Send us another deuce Mounty, but make this deuce wild. An outlaw don't thrive on soft policemen.

Tanned Hyde.

Tanned Hyde was obviously a nickname, but it stood for one of the cleverest and most ruthless operators the North had ever known. Policemen had died to establish the fact that the law stayed on an outlaw's trail until he was brought to justice. That fact, once established, had made it possible for a few law officers to keep order in a vast area. Men inclined to prey on their fellows hesitated. There might not be a Yellow-legs within hundreds of miles, but one was certain to show

up shortly after a crime was committed.

Now Hyde was deliberately breaking down the Force's reputation by committing crimes and vanishing. There must be men who knew Tanned Hyde's identity, Sheridan reasoned, but either through fear or self-interest, they were silent. There was significance in that last line about an outlaw not thriving on soft policemen. Likewise, a policeman grew stale in a peaceful country.

"The old man hunters who made the Force's reputation have retired," Sheridan grumbled, "and the new blood isn't getting the old-time training because the old-time outlaw is either in prison or behaving himself. Now unless we bag Tanned Hyde there'll be a general breakdown of law and the devil to pay generally."

The inspector had grown gray in the service, and nothing would have suited him better than a chance to tan Hyde's hide, himself, but it takes two good legs to mush the Dismal Creek country trails, and an old bullet wound gave Sheridan's right leg plenty of trouble after a few days on the trail.

"Who brought the message?" Mary Sheridan asked her husband.

"It came out in a shipment of fur," he answered. "Most anyone could have tucked it into a bale of fur at Dismal Creek or elsewhere. Damn it, Mary, it's a challenge to the Force. And not only that, there's devilish ingenuity in Hyde's crimes. Murders look like accidental deaths; cabins are burned and no one knows whether or not valuable furs were removed before the fire."

"Whom are you going to send?" she asked, adding: "It had better be an ace instead of a deuce."

"All I have is deuces," grumbled Sheridan, "and none of them wild."

"Why don't you go through your applications?" his wife suggested.

He snorted. "It was a sore subject with Sheridan. Former policemen were forever uncovering some youngster and seeing in him the makings of a Mounty.

"Trouble is," he fumed, "they're old and sentimental and they see elements in the sprouts that don't exist. And I, being an impractical old fool where retired policemen are concerned, give 'em a trial. They fail and give the Force a bad name. But I suppose it's any old port in a storm." He opened a drawer and brought out a file of applications.

Most of them were accompanied by photographs, physical dimensions of the applicant, and a glowing letter of recommendation from a constable of the old Northwest Mounted Police days.

One application held Sheridan's interest. "Dan Jessup," he said. "He looks man-sized." The application stated that Dan was six feet, weighed a hundred and eighty and had rusty hair. "Father Irish and mother Scotch. Good combination. He's twenty-three and has spent all of his life outdoors. Can ride, mush a dog team, shoot rapids, six-

guns and rifles. Trained by Fiddler Jim Coy." Sheridan snorted. "Remember him, Mary?"

Mrs. Sheridan remembered. Jim Coy had solved many of his crimes sitting in a chair and playing a fiddle. He claimed that music relaxed a man and helped him to think clearly. When Coy had everything worked out, he would pack his fiddle in its case and hit the trail.

"Why not send for Dan Jessup?" suggested Mary Sheridan. "You need someone."

"One fiddling policeman is enough," Sheridan declared. "At that, though, I like Jessup's looks."

"He probably isn't a fiddler," said his wife.

"Jim Coy trained him, didn't he? Well, that settles it. Jim always claimed his methods were best," Sheridan grumbled. "The damned cuss proved it often enough, too. When some of the Bantam Brown crowd sneaked into Dawson, Coy got 'em before they even rolled a drunk. Then down on the Yukon—"

He broke off abruptly and lit his pipe. Music might not help a man think, but tobacco did, Sheridan believed. Presently he said: "Mary, I'm sending for him—providing he isn't a fiddler."

Inspector Sheridan was waiting on the river bank—four months later—when Dan Jessup's boat landed. "Here's where I get off," he heard a husky six-footer who could have been no one but Jessup say. Five tourist girls kissed him fondly and sadly, and seven men shook hands with him.

"Crazy about women," Sheridan growled to his wife. "That's bad. The first pretty face—"

"Just a minute," Mary interrupted. "It struck me that the women were crazy about him. That's entirely different from him being crazy about them."

Her husband grinned. "You always did have a head on your shoulders," he admitted. He stepped closer to the boat's rail. "Where's your fiddle, Jessup?" he called.

"I don't play the fiddle," Dan answered. Relief swept over Sheridan's face, then froze. "I prefer the accordion." He held up a big leather case. "Music helps a man think, according to Jim Coy, and I believe he's right."

"I knew it," Sheridan groaned to Mary. "And look at the cuss. He's got kind o' long hair."

"So have the breeds and Indians," reminded his wife.

II

When Dan Jessup was sworn in, he said earnestly: "Inspector, this is the happiest day of my life. Since I was knee high to a grasshopper I've wanted to be a Mounty. I read everything I could get my hands on, and when Fiddler Jim Coy came to our town I camped at his place. In fact I got plenty of lickings because I neglected my school work for Jim. I may not come out of this alive, but I'll promise one

thing, I'll never let the Force nor you, down."

"There are several men and women at Dismal Creek who'll talk if they have faith in you, constable," Sheridan said. "They know what it means if outlaws get the upper hand. They know, too, something will happen to them if they talk. So they aren't talking until they get a policeman who can take care of them. Blacky Crawford was supposed to have been drowned in Dismal Rapids. Maybe his drowning wasn't an accident. He was coming out with a season's gold cleanup. Ainsworth, a trapper, might have gotten drunk and set the cabin on fire, but someone could have murdered him, taken his fur and fired the cabin.

"Steve White was caught in a snowslide. That might have been arranged. He had cooperated with the police on several occasions," Sheridan continued, "and wasn't liked by certain natives and breeds. Fred Davis, at Dismal Creek, is worth knowing. He's running one of the biggest trap lines in the country."

"Why hasn't Tanned Hyde put him out of business?"

"Davis is a tough customer," Sheridan answered. "Hyde has hesitated, probably. Win Davis, and I think you'll find the rest easy. I have one warning for you. Steer clear of Marie Burcham. The last three constables have fallen in love with her. You know how it is, a man in love lets things drop, and a smart girl, putting two and two together, might easily get an answer. I've never laid eyes on Marie, but I understand she's dark and lovely and knows how to win men. Keep away from her; she's too eager to get acquainted with the police I send up there. Finally, take nothing for granted. Doubt even your own eyes."

"What about this Marie? Has she a family? What's she doing up there?"

"Lives with her foster brother, Lon Ballard, who has the trading post," Sheridan answered. "I believe in being truthful, Jessup. It's too much to expect an inexperienced man to clean up this situation. I expect mistakes, even failure, but I still hold that a smart lawman can beat a smart outlaw in the long run. . . . We'll store your accordion and other stuff here until you come back with your prisoner."

"Thanks, but I'm taking the accordion with me. Nothing like music to help a man think," Dan answered.

Inspector Sheridan almost blew up. With difficulty he kept his emotions in check and made his way to the kitchen. "Pour me a good stiff drink of Scotch, Mary," he said. "I need something to steady my nerves. The Force has another musical policeman. Jessup's taking that damned musical bellows with him. Once it was Fiddler Jim. Now it's Accordion Dan. 'Dan, Dan, the accordion man, squeezes out tunes as he hunts his man.' Hell!"

Dan had heard Sheridan's jingle. and "Dan, Dan, the accordion man."

kept running through his head as he drove his canoe steadily toward Dismal Creek. He added other lines, some of which told of Dan's victories, and some of defeats. "The damned jingle is driving me crazy," he complained as he shot a small rapids.

Winter, Dan concluded, was right around the corner, for quiet pools contained a film of ice and spray glazed everything it touched. The air began spitting snow the day he landed at Dismal Creek. A log cabin, log barn, flag pole and picket fence painted white marked the police barracks. Grass had grown in the path leading to the door, and the chimney had a cold look.

"Dismal Creek post hasn't done much business, lately," Dan observed.

Log cabins along the creek bank marked the native village. The trading post itself was a two-story log affair flanked by smaller structures serving as storerooms. A huge wood pile lay behind the post. Smoke curled lazily from the chimneys. Sled dogs and children ran down to meet Dan.

"Another Yellow-legs," one boy said, smirking, and the others laughed knowingly. Plainly, the younger generation had scant respect for the law.

Dan unloaded the canoe and carried the accordion to the barracks. The door was unlocked, but it was evident prowlers had left the place strictly alone. Supplies were untouched, and there was a fine rifle hanging on pegs over a stone fireplace. A barred door opened into a cell containing benches and six bunks.

Hearing a soft step behind him, Dan turned quickly. A lovely dark-haired girl stood in the doorway smiling. She extended her hand.

"I'm Marie Burcham," she said. "Welcome to Dismal Creek."

"I'm Dan Jessup," he answered, taking her hand. "I'm glad to know you. Welcoming policemen is sort of routine, isn't it?"

"It has been said there are three shifts of policemen at Dismal Creek, one going, one here and one coming. But of late it's down to two—going and coming. I asked the boys to help you with your things. My brother wants you to have your meals with us until you're settled. It will take a couple of days to dry out this place. It's so damp and musty."

"Thanks. I'll be over," Dan said.

The boys came trooping up with his outfit, two of the stronger ones carrying the canoe which they racked in a shed. Dan thanked them and went over to meet the trader, Lon Ballard.

As he moved about the settlement, Dan sensed he was being watched. The atmosphere was tense, and except for Marie, the adults were inclined to keep their distance. "I've got it now," Dan thought. "Every man acts as if he thinks Hyde's watching him. Well, maybe he is."

Lon Ballard, solidly built with thick, unsmiling lips and sharp eyes,

extended a hard hand. "I hope you stay, Jessup," he said. "The others blundered, and the natives are getting hard to handle. When the big outlaws get away with their tricks, petty thieves try their hand. We'll eat in half an hour." He returned to a native who was bargaining.

The native began protesting, and Ballard's jaw resembled a steel trap. His lips hardly moved as he talked in dialect. Twice the native's dark eyes blazed, then he accepted the trader's offer.

"You're taking a chance, Lon," a white trapper said. "Some of these days they'll find you with a knife between your shoulders."

"Until the police get things in hand," Ballard answered, "you have to keep the trappers, particularly the breeds, in their place."

Dan walked over to the oil drum heater and warmed his back, which also gave him a chance to observe what was going on. Later, as winter deepened, the wires overhead would be heavy with drying socks and moccasins, but now they were almost bare.

A man with a thin, strong face and quiet manners came in, and again Dan felt the atmosphere grow tense, felt himself being weighed. The newcomer came over to him.

"I'm Fred Davis," he said. "Trapper. I've furs to check on whenever you're ready. No hurry, after all these months, though." He lowered his voice. "Watch yourself. Police aren't wanted in these parts by some."

"A shot in the back?"

"They aren't ready to go that far," Davis answered. "That'd bring too many Yellow-legs to these parts. Rather . . . an accident. I like you. Some time, I may be able to do you a good turn. I'll keep in touch with vou. You see . . . I've a girl I'd like to bring into this country when there's law and order." He spoke with almost no movement of the lips. "No hurry. Winter's ahead of us. I'm leaving tomorrow. Be back in a couple of months."

Dan noticed that Marie was busy, but not too busy to notice what was going on. Later she said: "Fred Davis talked a blue streak, didn't he? Unusual for him. He took a shine to you."

Dan wondered how she knew, because Davis' back had been toward the girl, and his voice little more than a whisper. Suddenly he realized the answer. Davis had emphasized his words with hand movements.

The meal was cooked by a squaw and served by her daughter, an attractive breed girl who obviously made a play for Dan's attention. "I'd better be pleasant to her," he thought, "or she's liable to pull something. Can't get too friendly, either. I've never seen so many pitfalls, deadfalls, and what-not."

Marie flattered a man by listening, as if everything he said was of major importance. She had given the policemen before him that same attention, Dan sensed, and they had fallen hard for her. "And she'll

Dan kept his rifle ready as he cautiously approached the still figure perched in the tree.

give the man who follows me the same attention," he thought.

When the meal was concluded Marie asked: "Will you play for us? Oh, we know that you brought your accordion along." She hummed, "'Dan! Dan! The accordion man . . .'"

Far to the South a native had heard Inspector Sheridan sing that to his wife. It had beaten Dan to Dismal Creek, and he thought: "Moccasin telegraph travels fast." But he said: "Sure I'll play. How about a dance, here in the post? There's plenty of room."

"Dance?" Lon Ballard queried, unsmiling. "Well, I guess so. They haven't had fun in a long time."

That night they cleared the floor and counters. Women sat on the counters between dances, and the men lined the walls. The news traveled fast, and before the evening was over, breeds and natives were coming in from nearby creeks.

"Dad Zednick will play his fiddle," Marie told Dan, "and give you a chance to dance."

Dad was eighty, but he could play, and Dan waltzed with Marie. She was soft and stirring to his arms one moment, tense the next and he sensed that she was a prey to conflicting emotions. Dad played a *home waltz* at five o'clock and Dan again danced with Marie.

"I like you, Dan," she confided suddenly. "I—" She had intended to say more, but suddenly her lips tightened, her body grew tense, then relaxed. "You've given us a wonderful time."

"We're going to see a lot of each other," he predicted.

"Policemen don't stay here long," she said. "It's said that the old breed of Mounty has died out, and they don't make that kind any more. Sometimes . . . I wonder."

"If I leave," he said, "I'll take you with me." He spoke for effect, and felt her grow suddenly tense. "Not in line of duty, of course," he added, and she relaxed.

"I'll never leave this country," she said quietly.

"In which case," he said lightly, "I guess I'll have to stay."

III

There was frost on everything when Dan returned to the barracks, and daylight was a long way off. The pond ice was solid, and the creek was low.

It was warm in the barracks and Dan found a comfortable chair and relaxed, playing softly on his accordion, and reviewing the night's events.

"Plenty went on under the surface," he mused. "When I told Marie I'd take her with me, she had visions of arrest. Has she a guilty conscience? It could be something else, of course. I was being sized up by everyone. They put me down as a softy, more interested in music than police work. Good! That's what I wanted. When a man isn't on guard, he's careless. Hyde will slip. And he was there. Who? I don't know—just a hunch, plus a tense atmosphere. When Fred Davis returns I'll learn something. He'll talk if I convince him that I'll stand up to Hyde."

Dan was up at eight o'clock and by ten o'clock was checking on furs. He startled a breed named Big Pete by confiscating his fur.

"You poisoned these animals," he charged, "and the hides prove it."

He had planned to release Pete with a warning, but the big fellow saw only arrest and a jail sentence. That, plus his growing contempt for the police, sent him into action.

"You no arrest Pete," he snarled, pulling out a knife. He advanced with the keen blade and sharp point upward.

Dan started to rush Pete, but stopped abruptly. His timing was perfect. Pete slashed upward and missed by a good six inches. Before he could bring his arm down, Dan had him by the wrist. He gave a sharp twist and the knife clattered to the floor. Pete's left fist nearly separated three of Dan's ribs from his spine. Dan staggered, recovered, and began cutting the breed's face with left jabs. It wouldn't hurt to have a walking exhibit to prove that the new Mounty was handy with his fists.

With a bellow of pain, Pete closed in and they went to the floor. Dan could hear people coming and a moment later he saw dark, interested faces pressed to the windows, but no man offered aid. Pete set the pace, making it a dirty fight, with nothing barred, and Dan played the game the breed's way until color drained from the dark face and he quit, whimpering.

Dragging Pete to the cell, Dan locked the door. "There's nothing wrong with you that a lot of groaning and some time won't cure," he said.

Dan felt little elation. Pete was small fry at best. Now the settlement knew that the Mounty was something more than a musician, and Hyde would react accordingly.

When Dan saw Marie she said: "They tell me it was quite a fight."

"The point is," Dan answered, "these people must be taught to respect the law. If a few policemen

are killed in bringing it about, well . . . that's the way it was in the beginning."

"I think," Marie suggested, "it might be a good idea if you gave another dance, just to show your friendliness toward the people generally."

"Good idea," he agreed. "How about next Saturday night?"

She nodded. "That will give those well out in the bush time to get in."

By Friday morning Pete was feeling like himself again. "You fought a policeman, intending to kill him," Dan explained, "and that means that you're going to spend quite awhile behind bars. I'll make no promises, but if you know anything of the mysterious deaths in these parts, you had better talk fast, because if it later develops that you had a hand in them, chances are that you'll be hanged. Think it over."

He got out his accordion and began playing. Out of the corner of his eye, he studied the breed's reaction. The music was romantic, suggesting starry-eyed girls, mellow nights and soft moonlight. Big Pete was young and impressionable. Life was sweet and the thought of losing it terrified him. He began to sweat.

"He'll crack, in a few days," Dan mused. "And if he talks, then Fred Davis may loosen up."

The post was packed Saturday night. and Dan saw many new faces, mostly young breeds and natives who had mushed in to size up the new Mounty. It was snowing hard and the air was heavy with the steamy smell of drying socks and moccasins.

When Dad came in with his fiddle, Dan danced with Marie, but instead of joining her in a bite to eat later on, he hurried over to the barracks. The snow around the area was unbroken and Dan stopped.

"I had a hunch somebody might try and reach that prisoner," he said. "I guess not. Still . . . I'll have a look."

The first thing he noticed on opening the door was a series of puddles, left by melting snow. They went straight to the cell door, which was locked. Pete, apparently, was asleep, but Dan opened the door and stepped inside. Pete had disappeared, leaving blankets rolled up to suggest a sleeping man in his bunk.

"A damned smooth job," Dan mused. "Someone with keys unlocked both the barracks door and the cell door, then locked them again. It was done early so that the drifting snow would cover all tracks. Score one for Tanned Hyde."

There was no use making a search. Pete knew the country—every trail, food cache and shelter cabin. Dan returned to the dance, hoping someone with guilty knowledge, would give him an inquiring glance. Outwardly at least no one knew of the escape. Everyone seemed interested only in a good time. There was less tenseness at this dance. The Mounty was a known quantity, and curiosity about him was missing.

"The smart ones are confident," he concluded, "and the dumb ones think that they had better behave."

The following morning Dan did the unexpected by making no mention of Big Pete's escape. If anyone acted or talked as if they knew of the escape, then he would have to explain the source of his knowledge. It was a thin thread, but it might lead to something. There was no sense in doing the expected—organizing a search party. That would be a waste of effort.

Forty-eight hours later Dan shrugged his shoulders—not a man or woman seemed aware of Big Pete's disappearance. "Hyde, if he's in the village, and his men are cool customers," Dan mused. "Well, there's good mushing weather, all streams are frozen deep, and Davis should show up most any time."

The days dragged. Dan caught up on the back work; inspected bales of fur in Lon Ballard's warehouse and found everything in order; played for dances; and kept himself in physical trim by hard trips to familiarize himself with the country.

Early one morning a native awakened him. "You come quick," he said. "Wolves chase Fred Davis up tree. I think him freeze to death."

"Didn't you find out whether he was dead or alive?" Dan inquired sharply.

"Never touch dead man. Somebody say you kill. No good. Tell Yellow-legs about dead man. I show you."

As they mushed through the half light, the native explained that he had been coming in for supplies, and that he had noticed many wolf tracks leading to a point off the trail. He had investigated and found a light hand sled near a tree. A sleeping bag and other items used on the trail had been torn to bits. On looking up he had seen Davis.

"Things are running on schedule up here," Dan thought. "Men who can help you clear up things, die or disappear. Dammit, the blasted wolves *would* have to tree my best bet."

About seven miles from Dismal Creek Post the native stopped and pointed. Davis' body was visible in the growing light. The snow around the tree was packed solid by the constant circling of wolves.

"Him put pack board on limb," the native said. "Make chair. Wait for wolves to go. Wolves no go. Him freeze."

Dan nodded and climbed the tree. Davis' body was held in a sitting posture by a line running around the tree trunk and tied across his chest. He was sitting on a pack board lashed to two limbs. His feet hung down, well beyond reach of the wolves. His eyes were half open, frozen in a sort of horror.

Dan lowered the body to the waiting native, then examined Davis' rifle. It was empty.

"We'll lash the remains onto the sled," Dan said, "and mush back."

IV

Everyone was on hand when they mushed through the settlement. The body, frozen in a sitting posture, lent a grotesque shape to the tarp which covered it.

"Davis was a good man," Lon Ballard said. "Paid his debts on time and put a reasonable price on his furs. Too bad he died roosting in a tree. He'd have preferred to fight. He was that kind."

Marie said nothing. Her face was composed, but underneath, Dan sensed, she was struggling with her emotions.

"I'll set the boys to work thawing ground for a grave," Lon Ballard offered.

"Thanks," Dan answered. "Until then the remains will be kept at the barracks."

Later Dan sat down in an easy chair, relaxed and began playing the accordion, his mind going slowly over details. "Suddenly he sat up with a jerk. "Fiddler Jim used to say, 'Never jump at a conclusion!' And I haven't. My bet is, this is another smooth murder. A man freezing to death goes to sleep peacefully. Davis' face shows agony. Who did it? Hyde? Probably. Big Pete or someone else? Maybe."

When he finished playing, he had arrived at a plan of action. Walking over to the trading post, he asked Ballard some routine questions. His attitude was one of bewilderment. "Why did an experienced man like Davis let himself be trapped by wolves? I don't understand it."

"The best men get careless," answered Lon Ballard. "You go along awhile, nothing happens, so you think it'll never happen. That's human nature."

"You're something of a thinker," Dan remarked.

"What else is there to do?" Ballard asked. "Work! Work! Work! Some of these days when I've made enough to live the way I want to, I'll clear out."

"And take Marie with you?"

"She wouldn't leave. Has a lot of fool ideas about improving the lot of the natives," Ballard answered. "She's a pretty good nurse and spends a lot of time doctoring sick kids."

"And you don't feel the way she does?"

"I'm a realist," Ballard answered. "This is a land run by the law of survival. It's the only way it can be run—claw, tooth, fang. Only the strong come to the top, so the sick and weak must die. There's no mercy in nature, but Marie can't understand that."

"There's a lot in what you say," Dan answered, "but, just the same, I like Marie's attitude."

"You're in love with her," charged Ballard.

"Why do you say that?"

"All men fall in love with her," the trader answered. "There's something about her. I don't know what it is, but she never falls in love with any of them. It seems to me that she must be waiting for something or someone."

"Maybe it's the right man," Dan suggested.

Ballard shrugged, and returned to his work. He seemed surprised at himself because he had talked so much. When Dan returned to the barracks the trader was thoughtful. "Marie," he mused, "she don't seem to be waiting as much as she did. She acts like her *someone* had arrived. I wonder if he's Dan Jessup?" He shook his head and said: "The dumbest policeman they've sent yet. Plays his accordion and expects something to happen!"

Marie

At the barracks, Dan quietly began the grim task of removing the clothing from Davis' body. While the remains were rigid, the clothing had thawed and could be handled with a little patience.

"A futile business," he mused, "but as Fiddler Jim would say, 'Let's take nothing for granted.' No knife or bullet holes, no bloodstains, no—" He broke off and whistled softly. A round hole between the shoulder blades, but free of stains, confirmed Fiddler Jim's theory of crime detection.

"Drilled clean through so there's no bullet," Dan said, "but no holes in parka or shirt. Someone figured Davis would cooperate with the Force and shot him in the back, removing his clothes with bullet holes and substituting a shirt from his pack. Chances are he wasn't wearing his parka at the time. To cover up, the murderer waited until the body froze in a sitting posture, then moved it to the tree. Meat scattered about would draw wolves to the tree, and snow would cover all tracks. Murders like this one take a lot of planning and thinking —a typical Hyde crime. Well, as Fiddler Jim would say, 'Silence is golden!' so I'll say nothing and saw wood."

Dan sawed very little wood the next few days, but he did a lot of accordion playing and thinking. "There's only one man that I know of in these parts who's smart and methodical enough to carry through this sort of crime—Lon Ballard. Motive? Fear that Davis would talk. And the motive behind it all is money enough to buy that estate," Dan finally concluded.

His next problem was to unearth evidence, or devise some plan that would identify Ballard with the crime. Thus far the man had covered his tracks so well that there

wasn't evidence of any nature against him.

Working backwards, Dan arrived at the conclusion that Ballard had duplicate keys of the barracks and cell doors and that it was he who had released Big Pete. "I'm not covering myself with glory so far," he growled. "I thought someone would reveal guilty knowledge of Big Pete's release, but so far not a soul even acts as if he knew. And *someone* must know."

Silence having failed, Dan decided to gamble. He walked boldly into the trading post and said: "Ballard, you're the smartest man in these parts. I need a little help with a problem. Can you come over to the barracks this afternoon?"

For a moment Ballard seemed to hesitate. "Why, sure," he said at last in his quiet, unsmiling way. "Sure. What's the trouble?"

"I'll explain later. In the meantime say nothing of my request for help. A Mounty, you know, is supposed to get by without help."

"They need help," Ballard answered. "All of them. In this country few men stand alone."

Dan was playing the accordion when Ballard appeared. "Here's the situation," Dan said bluntly. "Davis was murdered."

The abrupt statement staggered the trader. He turned a sickly green, then color surged back and his face was a beet red. A second later outwardly he was his normal, assured self.

"Murdered!" he repeated quietly.

"Yes. Have a look," Dan invited. As a rule the last thing a killer wants to do is to look at his victim, particularly when others are around.

Dan led the way, but he watched Ballard's shadow out of the corner of his eye. The trader half crouched for perhaps a second, then decided against whatever he had in mind.

The remains, in a back room, were lighted by the sun's rays slanting through the window. "Here we are," Dan said. "There's the bullet hole. Must have shattered the spine. Bloodstains removed, and clothing without bullet holes put on, to cover the crime. Now who's smart enough to put over such a trick?"

"I don't know," Ballard answered. "There's no smart men in these parts."

"There's one man smart enough, and I'll tell you who he is," Dan said. He was handling the situation in a way to trick Ballard into some action prompted by fear and guilty knowledge. Fiddler Jim would have enjoyed watching his pupil in action. Ballard trembled, then his eyes grew icy, and his iron nerve pulled him through.

"Who is smart enough?" he asked.

"Someone out to make a quick cleanup," Dan replied. "He probably drowned Blacky Crawford in Dismal Rapids and took his gold. I'll gamble that he took Ainsworth's fur before murdering him and firing his cabin. He's taunted the police with messages signed Tanned Hyde. Every native knows that."

"What's the purpose?"

"There was a time when natives would cooperate with the police. They believed in law, either from fear or for practical reasons," Dan answered. "Hyde knows that if he breaks down respect for the law, and lesser criminals make trouble, he can get away with more in the general upheaval."

"It sounds reasonable," agreed Ballard. "Where do I come in?" The words came hard, but he spoke them calmly.

"Because you're the richest trader in these parts," Dan replied. "And Hyde's likely to try his luck with you."

Strain had almost cracked Ballard. Any moment he had expected to be accused of murder, then suddenly the Mounty appeared to be warning him. The trader's relief was a confession. He realized that he was sweating and began wiping his face on his sleeve. Then he covered his reaction with a terse: "You've thrown quite a scare into me, Jessup. Quite a scare! You're right, it could happen to me."

"Have you any idea who Hyde really is?"

"None at all," Ballard answered. "I doubt if he works out of Dismal Creek. He's from some other part of the country. I think I'd better be on guard. I'm sorry I can't help you, but if something comes up I'll let you know."

"Thanks for your help, and I may call on you again," Dan said lightly. "Tanned Hyde doesn't know it, but he left a clue to his identity on Davis' body. It's going to take time, but by a process of elimination, I'll know the guilty man's identity in a few weeks at the outside."

Lon Ballard walked slowly back to his trading post, while Dan Jessup lit his pipe and reflected on his actions. "The sudden proof of murder, plus a look at Davis' body, almost cracked him," he mused. "A couple of times he was set to jump me, but back in his mind is the feeling that I'm not pointing an accusing finger at him—yet. He's hanging tight, but worrying about the supposed evidence left on Davis' body. Dammit, I wish that he had left something that we could pin a case on. I'd arrest him right now. In the meantime, I wouldn't be surprised if he makes a move or two. Something is liable to happen—sudden. And to me."

V

Several mornings later someone rattled the door and Dan yelled: "Who is it?"

"It's Marie," the girl called. "Sorry to get you out of bed, but there's a sick child ten miles out, and I'm wondering if you'll mush me. It's blowing a gale or I'd go alone."

Dan dressed hastily and opened the door.

"Lon says that we can eat at the post," Marie said. "Breakfast is ready."

"So Lon is helping this along!" Dan thought. "I wonder if this is some idea of his or is it on the level? Well, I'll find out soon."

An hour later they were on the trail, which was mostly drifted over. Dan went ahead, leaving Marie at the sled handle bars. At the end of two miles she said: "It's my turn now."

"I can break ten miles of trail," he argued.

"Of course," she agreed. "But not as fast as if you are relieved. Time counts."

He went back and rode the runners while she smashed through the drifts for a mile, then he took over again. She let him break trail a mile, then was up in front insisting that he ride the runners again. There was something about her actions that looked queer, and when a drift momentarily stopped them Don said abruptly: "What's behind this?"

Under his steady gaze Marie flushed. "I. . . . don't want you . . . killed," she said. "There are certain places where it's easy to pick off a trail breaker."

"And you broke trail at those places?" he asked.

"Yes. I don't think whoever is . . . Tanned Hyde . . . will shoot me," she said slowly.

"But you're willing to take a chance on it?" She nodded, and Dan said gently: "Why?"

"The other Mounties tried," she answered, "but they didn't have the experience to match wits with Hyde. Your methods are different and I've hopes they'll be successful. I don't want you killed without having a chance at least."

"The dogs have rested and if we delay longer, they'll start cooling off, so let's go. I'll break trail," he said. "There might not be a sick kid, you know. This might be a trick." He was thinking that Lon Ballard wasn't above using his foster sister as a decoy.

But there *was* a sick child, and they met its mother a mile from the cabin. To speed things, the woman had broken trail which the gale was already filling with snow.

Marie wasn't a graduate nurse, and her knowledge of the profession came mostly from reading, then doing her best when someone was sick or injured. For two days she had little rest, but forty-eight hours after they arrived she had nursed a ten-year-old native girl toward the road to recovery.

"Now go to sleep," Dan said, "and I'll keep an eye on things."

It was evening when she awakened. He made tea, got her something to eat, while she checked on the child.

"Shall we go back tonight?" she asked when she had finished eating.

"No, you'd better rest a little more. The storm is raging and we'll buck it. But daylight mushing will be better."

They sat before an open fire and let the wind howl about the eaves. Watching this girl nurse a sick child had given Dan a new insight to her character. He couldn't believe she was playing Tanned Hyde's game, though that was Inspector Sheridan's belief, and he had warned Dan against her. If Dan wanted to have faith he could remember that Marie

had protected him on the trail. If he wanted to doubt he could tell himself that her actions were a pose to gain his confidence.

Certainly she knew the fascination she held for men. But he couldn't point to a single instance in which he might say that she had deliberately used it on him. Nevertheless he had felt the sweetness of its power. He told himself that nothing could come of this. He must arrest, perhaps kill, her foster brother, or be killed by him.

Dan hadn't intended taking her in his arms. He had only noticed that she looked dead tired and near exhaustion, and he had dropped his arm across her shoulder to indicate that he understood and admired her courage. Something in his touch had made her break and cry a little. "If this is an act," he thought, hating himself for the thought, "then it's a good one."

"I'm so tired," Marie said at last, "and I've been so tired, and so worried . . . for so long."

Then he was telling her that he loved her and hoping the knowledge would help. He was telling her that he was in the North for good, or until he failed, or was a policeman so long that they retired him. And she was telling him that he would never fail. At midnight they were planning their future and she snuggled deep into his arms and presently slept like a happy child. He awakened her at two o'clock because the log fire had died and the cabin was cold.

While Dan put more wood on, Marie checked on her patient, then turned in on a cot in the girl's room. Dan spread his sleeping bag on a pile of hides and was sound asleep a few minutes later. When he awakened, the sick girl's mother was frying caribou steak and keeping an eye on a pot of coffee. Sunlight was pouring over trees burdened with snow. Not a breath of air was stirring. Dan felt a sense of relief. Even Tanned Hyde would hesitate to shoot a man when there was no drifting snow to cover his tracks.

VI

As they mushed into Dismal Creek Post, Marie said: "Be careful, Dan—please. You have a bad habit of sitting by a window when you read or play your accordion. If Tanned Hyde doesn't make the most of that, then some native with too much whiskey might try his luck."

"I'll remember," promised Dan.

They stopped in front of the post and Lon Ballard was the first one to greet them. "Somebody robbed my storeroom," he reported. "Picked a night when it was blowing and snowing. I couldn't find a track."

"What was taken?"

"The most expensive fur," the trader answered. "Marten worth about five thousand dollars."

"I've been delayed," Dan told him, "but within a week I'll know who Tanned Hyde is. I've a man lined up who'll identify him. Once he's arrested, I expect to clear up a number of things, including your robbery. There isn't much chance of the fur

getting-out of the country this time of the year."

"I hope you're right," the trader replied.

Dan went home that night and pulled down the window shade when it came time to read and play his accordion. He set the light so that his shadow would be distinctly outlined on the shade. "A man wouldn't want a better target than that," he told himself. "A regular live decoy."

Passing natives noticed the Mounty's rugged profile as they passed the barracks and commented in dialect. Marie, stepping out to enjoy the Northern Lights, forgot the lights and said in an annoyed tone: "Darn him, he's forgotten my warning."

Lon Ballard, stepping outside his trading post, had also noted several details—the target, the clear air, and the wind that was blowing the snow over the ground. He went inside and said to the men gathered around the heater: "I'm tired. I think I'll turn in early tonight." He stretched, yawned sleepily and went upstairs to his room.

Taking a rifle out of a closet, he wiped it carefully. The sights were tipped with white, increasing accuracy after dark. He stepped to the window, opened it and looked down. A thicket extended from a ridge to a point within a hundred yards of the building. He descended the fire escape ladder, slipped swiftly into the thicket and made his way to the ridge.

Here a problem developed. Trees and buildings blocked a clear view of the barracks window. Ballard moved slowly until he found a narrow space that gave a clear view. "A bullet doesn't need much room to get through," he mused.

He rested the rifle on rock and took careful aim. "That shadow is just a little larger than life-sized," he said, "which means he's close to the window shade. I can't miss if I aim at the center."

He knew exactly what his rifle would do, and he made allowance for the wind. Gently he squeezed the trigger. "Dammit!" he exclaimed, "I missed!" He fired again, then turned to hurry back to his room before people came out to investigate the shots.

"Enjoying a quiet evening of murder?" a voice inquired.

Ballard whirled and looked into a sawed-off shotgun. "Dan Jessup!" he gasped. He thought: "So this deuce *is* wild."

"Yeah,' Dan answered shortly. "Drop your rifle and head for the barracks."

"This isn't murder," snarled Ballard. "The best you've got on me is attempted murder."

"And that's enough to lock you up," Dan answered. "Once you're behind the bars, there'll be those who'll testify for the crown to save their own skins. You made several mistakes, Ballard. First you got rid of the smart men in the country, leaving the field to yourself. Then you committed crimes that only a smart man would commit. That

pointed to you as the guilty man. The problem was to prove it. When I showed you Davis' body there was guilt written all over you, but not the kind that could be presented in court. But it did confirm what I thought.

"Time was flying, and you were beginning to worry," Dan went on. "You robbed your own trading post to divert suspicion. That looked like a good move but there was one flaw—no native would take a chance on robbing you. I had to bring things to a showdown, so I let you believe that I would have positive proof of Hyde's true identity in a short time. You believed it, and set about thinking of ways to kill me and escape a murder charge. My profile against the window was a tempting target, and I figured that you'd take a chance on the first clear night when wind was blowing snow enough to cover tracks. Well . . . Ballard?"

The trader moved doggedly ahead of the Mounty; passed the crowd gathering to investigate the shots; through the gate, and up the steps and into the barracks. He looked quickly at the window and Dan's profile cut from black paper and pinned to the curtain. He looked at Marie, pale and shaking, but said nothing.

"You . . . Lon!" the girl exclaimed. "I should've known. Anything, any way to pile up money." She walked away, and Dan searched his prisoner and found keys that fitted the barracks and cell doors.

"I had an idea that you turned Big Pete loose," Dan said. "Well, he's the next order of business."

He returned to the outer room. Marie was gone. Dan made his way to the girl's living quarters and knocked.

"Come in," Marie said.

Dan closed the door behind him and looked at her. "A mounted policeman is actually two men," he said. "First, he's a policeman. Secondly he's an average man who has his friends, falls in love with a girl and hopes to marry her. He can never let his job touch his private life, nor his private life touch his job. That's the way it is, Marie, and that's the way it'll always have to be, you know."

"I understand," she answered. "Lots of little things made me doubt Lon at times, but what I called my common sense argued that a man who could make so much money legitimately didn't need to go in for crime." She sighed. "Lon and I never were close, but—" She began to cry and Dan took her into his arms. In a little while she stopped crying.

"Here're my plans," Dan said, "I'm leaving in the morning to take Lon to Inspector Sheridan. Then I'm coming back. I hope you're here waiting for me."

Marie smiled at him. "I'll be here waiting for you, Dan—always."

THE END

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By Walt Coburn

KILBOURN BROS. —WOLF WRANGLERS

Until the Big Four were smoked out of their hole, even the law couldn't collect bounty on their scalps.

1

THE high-stake poker game that had been running thirty-six hours at the Owl had finally ended. The heavy losers like Bill Elias and Mike McConnico and Anse Jepson had left town, bleary-eyed for sleep, working on whiskey to keep awake. Elias had headed back to his cattle ranch on Box-Elder Creek. McConnico had pulled out in his buckboard with a driver, for his Bear Gulch Mine. Anse Jepson had gone back to his sheep outfit in Little Basin. If they were sadder, they said nothing about it. Wiser, they might be planning a revenge poker game in their minds. But they had left the smoke-laden, stale-booze stench of the Owl for the cleaner, fresher air of the Montana prairie, and put the little railroad cowtown of Cottonwood behind them.

It was past midnight and there

were probably a dozen idlers at the bar and small-stake tables. Cato Munday, owner of the Owl and high-stake gambler, was counting his heavy winnings into the big safe in his private office when the door behind him opened and closed. Quietly. A man wearing a black silk neck handkerchief over his face, his clothes hidden by a long yellow saddle slicker buttoned to his throat, stood there, his six-shooter in his hand.

Cato Munday was fast with a gun. But that long poker session had left him exhausted for sleep. His brain was tired and his other faculties were slowed down. As he went for his gun the masked man in the slicker took a swift step or two. The barrel of his six-shooter thudded down against the gambler's head and Cato Munday went limp.

The masked man pulled a long canvas sack from under his slicker. He emptied the contents of the big safe into the sack. Money, valuables left in hock to the gambler, papers that bore the I O U signatures of numerous men who hadolost to Cato Munday from time to time, even the ledger that carried the gambler's accounts, went into the canvas sack. Lastly, the gambler's belly gun.

Munday was not quite knocked out. He lay there, his eyes slitted, motionless, playing possum. He waited until the man had gone out, closing the door softly behind him. Then he got groggily to his feet, cursing when he found his gun had been taken. He stumbled to the door and yanked it open and yelled in a croaking voice to his bartender and a bouncer and a couple of dealers and cappers.

"Get that man in the slicker that just went out of here! I've been robbed!"

Cato Munday never touched liquor, but he was reeling like a drunken man and a trickle of blood oozed from a scalp wound under his sleek black hair and down across his handsomely chiseled face that was the color of old ivory. His pale-yellow eyes were a little glazed. He collapsed before he reached the bar where he kept another gun.

It was dark outside and the black drizzle was filled with noise. Jerkline Jones, freighter, was getting a late start out of town with his sixteen-horse jerk line outfit that hauled four tarp-covered high-boarded freight wagons and the canvas-topped caboose.

Jerkline Jones and his swamper, Two Dog Moore, spent a lot of their spare dollars on red, white and blue ivory rings, and small bells that were strung on bands between the tops of the hames. Now their blacksnake whips were cracking like pistols. A hundred small bells, the size of a cup, were jangling and chiming gayly. The chain harness was clanking and the lead bars and stretchers and spreaders were adding to the din as the sixteen horses tightened the tugs and wagon wheels rolled. And through this din roared the leather-lunged voice of the freighter.

Jerkline Jones was six and a half feet tall, rawboned, with a mass of

dirty yellow beard and hair that came to his shoulders. He rode his nigh wheeler and handled the jerkline while little Two Dog Moore rode along the line of eight teams cracking his blacksnake whip.

"Tighten up!" roared Jerkline, and called off the names of his horses from the lead team down the string and swing teams to his wheelers. "Tighten up there! You, Hell an' Damnation! Beer an' Whiskey! Nip an' Tuck! Take It an' Leave It! Hay Foot an' Straw Foot! Roulette an' Faro! Ace an' Deuce! Broke an' Hungry! Tighten them tugs! Tighten up! Haw!"

As men with guns in their hands came out of the saloon, three or four of them running to the long hitch-rack where saddled horses stood, the sixteen-horse team with its clanking, lumbering wagons swung across the wide main street, blocking it so that the men who had mounted their horses had to ride in around and behind the buildings and thus lose valuable time in the pursuit. Meanwhile somewhere in the black drizzle of the night sounded the pounding of shod roofs as a horse went yonderly at a run. The roar of guns added now to the din.

The men cursed Jerkline and he cursed them back with bellowing profanity and without once repeating himself. Jerkline and Two Dog, both tanked up on Cottonwood's forty-rod whiskey, had worked until long past dark loading their freight wagons. They were hauling powder to the Bear Gulch Mine at Twin Buttes, grub for the general store there, whiskey and beer for several saloons. And while they finished loading, the sixteen-horse string team had stood with chain tugs slack, munching oats from the big nose bags hung on their heads.

Making a midnight start in the drizzle was what Jerkline called startin' out in the cool of the evenin'. And always when he pulled out of town, he made that difficult turn in the street to let Cottonwood know that the greatest jerkline artist in Montana was turnin' 'em on a dime an' givin' back a nickel change.

The freight outfit got under way, bells jingling, blacksnakes popping, Jerkline Jones cussing in his bellowing voice.

In the two-wheeled canvas-topped caboose that was big enough to hold two bunks, a small sheet-iron stove and a few cupboards and shelves, a small-sized man sat on the edge of a bunk nursing a partly empty bottle. He sat there in the darkness of the caboose with his bottle, singing softly to himself, oblivious to all outside clamor.

The door of the caboose opened and a man stepped inside, shutting the door after him. There was the swishing sound of a wet slicker and muffled sounds. The man was breathing hard, as though he had been running. Then the quick sounds of labored breathing hushed. A man's voice, low-pitched and dangerous, sounded inside the closed caboose.

"Light a match! Pronto!"

The little man on the bunk struck a match. He carried the flame

cupped in his hands, to the bowl of a richly colored meerschaum pipe with a curved clouded amber stem. The light flare showed the little man's face with its two days' stubble of graying mouse-colored whiskers, his grayish face, his mild blue, blood-shot eyes. He gave no sign of fear or alarm when he saw the six-shooter in the intruder's hand. The man in the slicker had a black-silk handkerchief pulled up across the lower part of his face. The pair of eyes above it were steel-gray, cold, dangerous.

"Who the devil are you?" asked the man in the yellow saddle slicker. "How did you git in here? And why? Talk fast."

"There's no cause for belligerency," the little man's soft voice matched the mildness of his faded blue eyes. "I'm just a paying passenger to Twin Buttes. The amiable Two Dog suggested that I . . . ah . . . lay low until we were a few miles out of town. Then his partner, Jerkline, would not be so stony-hearted as to unload me and my *Tribune* in the desolate prairie wasteland. He assured me that Jerkline was a diamond in the rough and that beneath his unbathed, unshorn exterior lay hidden a heart of purest gold. Permit me to make myself known. I am Waldo Leandro Smith, journeyman printer and publisher of that oracle, that printed voice crying the truth in the wilderness, the Twin Buttes *Tribune*."

"Never heard of it."

"But you shall. If you'll be patient until we pass beyond the limits of the thriving little hamlet of Cottonwood, I'll light a lantern and you'll read the first issue. Printed within the lowly confines of Cottonwood's feed and livery barn, its contents are for the most part devoted to the biography of one Two Dog Moore. The genial Two Dog, never having seen his name in print, succumbed to the temptation of what is vulgarly known as a bribe. In return for this printing of his exclusive life's story, he agreed to load my printing press on one of the wagons and carry me as a stowaway in the caboose. Will you join me in a small libation, sir?"

"You talk like one of Anse Jepson's locoed sheepherders. Don't strike another light. And shut up."

The freight outfit was pulling out of town, to the rumble of the laden wagons and the rattle of chain harness and the jingle of bells. Blacksnakes were cracking, the two-wheeled caboose was pitching and rolling and jolting lazily along the rutted road. The man in the slicker cussed tonelessly.

Men on horseback were out there now, firing questions at Jerkline.

"He robbed Cato Munday! Cleaned the Owl. Hang it, Jerkline, you or Two Dog must've sighted him. Whichaway did he go?"

"Whichaway would you go," roared Jerkline, "if you'd pulled off a holdup? Canada a night's ride to the north. The Bear Paws and Little Rockies to the south, and the badlands yonder side along the Missouri River. Don't go shootin' around

these wagons. I'm haulin' powder. Tighten up! You, Hell an' Damnation! Beer an' Whiskey! Nip an' Tuck!"

The men on horseback rode on into the night. The freight outfit rolled along the mud-slippery road. The door of the moving caboose opened. Jerkline's whisper was as loud as another man's shout.

"You in there, Lant? You make it all right?"

"I'm in here. So is a locoed little half-pint codger that says he prints a newspaper and he's got a name called Waldo Leándro Smith."

Jerkline groaned as though he had been suddenly kicked in the belly. Then he ran through his vocabulary of cuss words and was out of breath when he finished.

"He's bin a-pesterin' me two-three days, while we was loadin', to take him an' his damned printin' press to Twin Buttes. Mebbeso we'll have to just knock 'im in the head, Lant. I swear I don't know how the hell he got here."

"He got out his first issue of his Twin Buttes *Tribune*," explained Lant dryly. "It carries the life story of Two Dog Moore. The second edition will run the exclusive story of the Owl holdup. Listen, you little dried-up an' blowed-away thing, kin you give us one good reason for lettin' you live?"

"I am the sole support of a motherless little girl." Waldo Leandro Smith hiccuped and took a drink. "I carry her picture next to my heart—in a wallet as empty as a discarded hat. Silence, gentlemen, is golden. I quote an old proverb. And on the other hand let me remind you of the might of the fearless press. Gentlemen, you are more than fortunate tonight. Behold your slightly inebriated but lion-hearted crusader. The Twin Buttes *Tribune* shall become the flaming sword of that crusader in the wilderness, these threadbare and tattered garments the shining armor. Such black-hearted knaves as Cato Munday, Bill Elias, Mike McConnico, and Anse Jepson shall feel the bite and sting and whetted edge of that untarnished, stainless blade of fearless might of the press." Waldo Leandro Smith hiccuped and became silent.

He sighed heavily and lay back on the bunk. There was the sound of gentle snoring.

Lant Kilbourn struck a match. Waldo Leandro Smith was not shamming. Lant blew out the match. He had let the black-silk neck handkerchief slip down loosely around his throat. He was sweating a little and there was a faint, mirthless grin on his weather-tanned, square-jawed face.

"It's up to you, Jerkline. You and Two Dog. It's my guess that this little ink-stained cuss ain't so dumb. Before he went out like Nellie's blind eye he dropped a strong hint. How long has he bin around Cottonwood? What does he know about Cato Munday or Elias or McConnico or Jepson?"

"He was bummin' drinks like any other bar fly, Lant, when we come to town last week. Spoutin' poems fer

drinks. He's a harmless, likable sort o' cuss. He has that printin' outfit at the feed barn—"

"It's on one of your wagons now," said Lant flatly, "and if he runs off at the head in that newspaper me'n' you will be makin' horsehair bridles at the Deer Lodge penitentiary. Sober 'im up and sound him out. He's bad news and no mistake. Better cache that sack of stuff in one of the wagons. I got to git back to the roundup."

II

Lant Kilbourn, ramrod of the Pool outfit, pulled his saddle and blanket and bridle from under a bunk. While the freight outfit kept moving under the guidance of Two Dog Moore, Lant untied his saddle horse that was tied to the off wheeler. Saddling the horse, he rode into the black drizzle. Less than an hour later he was riding around the beef herd that was lying fairly well on the bed ground in spite of the thin drizzle.

"You're a sight fer weak eyes, Lant," said a slicker-clad cowhand on night guard. "We bin worried. Sheriff Puck Powers and a deputy come past. I said you was on your way to Cottonwood to see about gittin' cars to ship our Pool cattle, that you'd left about five minutes before he showed up. He said the Owl had been held up. That Cato Munday either didn't know who bent a gun barrel across his head, or wasn't sayin', if he did know."

Lant had changed slickers in the caboose. He now wore a black saddle slicker that came no lower than his knees, and a pair of bullhide chaps. He had even changed hats. And the black-silk neck handkerchief was replaced by a soiled white one.

"I'll drift on to town," he said, grinning in the darkness, "and see about the cars. And pick up the news."

"It's bad business, Lant. Dangerous. I don't like it. But it come off without a hitch?"

"Like shootin' fish. I turned some feller's horse loose an' quirted him off into the night. And Cato Munday don't know who hit 'em. I gutted his damned safe. Elias and McConnico and Jepson donated our Pool runnin' expenses for the season. Keep your head up, mister. The Pool is out o' debt."

Lant Kilbourn was whistling softly as he headed back for town. But he kept remembering that little mild-eyed drunken Waldo Leandro Smith, and his whistling was tuneless and came from behind set teeth.

It was nearly daybreak when he sighted the lights of Cottonwood. The only lights left burning in town came from the Owl.

There was a train that passed through about four in the morning and the man who was station agent, telegraph operator, train dispatcher and freight agent was in the habit of fetching over the bundle of newspapers and the mail sacks that were thrown off at the depot. He would drop the mail at the post office and fetch a few extra copies of the Great

Falls, Butte and Helena newspapers to Cato Munday, the bartender and the Chinaman who had the restaurant next to the Owl. And thus he got his drinks, his early morning coffee and breakfast free. His name was Simms and he was Cottonwood's he-gossip. Simms was having his morning's morning at the bar and Cato Munday sat at a poker table with a pot of black coffee and the newspapers. Save for the bartender they were the only men in the place, not counting the bleary-eyed swamper who was mopping out and cleaning the big brass cuspidors.

Lant Kilbourn swung from his horse at the long hitchrack and went in through the swinging half doors, water dripping from his hat, short black slicker and bullhide chaps, his spurs jingling.

Simms and the bartender nodded. Cato Munday looked at Lant, his hard pale-yellow eyes taking in every detail of the tall, lean, wide-shouldered cowpuncher's appearance, from head to foot, from hat to boots. He was missing nothing. For a long moment he stared at Lant's boots and his silver-mounted spurs with their silver conchos on the spur straps, conchos that wore the Kilbourn K brand. Then the gambler's eyes lifted and there was a faint ghost of a smile on the thin-lipped mouth beneath a carefully trimmed black mustache.

Lant Kilbourn tensed under the level stare of those bloodshoot pale-yellow eyes. There was an empty, cold feeling inside his belly. He had worn those spurs when he pulled off his lone-handed holdup.

The gambler went back to his newspapers. There was no love lost between Cato Munday and Lant Kilbourn. Lant thought that Simms and the bartender were looking at him oddly. There was something like uneasiness, an inner, pent-up excitement on the nondescript face of the station agent.

"We'll be needin' cars day after-tomorrow, Simms," Lant said. "Forty cars. We'll commence loadin' right after daybreak. Have a drink."

The bartender and Simms had a copy of the Helena *Record* spread out on the bar. Simms fidgeted, took off his steel-rimmed spectacles and wiped them with a blue bandanna. The he-gossip of Cottonwood was fretting to break some sort of news. He cleared his throat.

"Your young brother, Chet," he said, pointing to an article in the paper, "has escaped from the Deer Lodge prison."

The healthy color drained from Lant Kilbourn's tanned, rain-wet face. The bartender shoved the late copy of the Helena *Record* around and tapped the article on the front page.

It was not much of a write-up, nor was it informative. It stated that Chet Kilbourn, young cowman and widely known at the rodeos for his skill at roping and bronc riding, had escaped from the penitentiary at Deer Lodge where he was serving a term for cattle rustling. Chet Kilbourn, along with other cowpunch-

ers, had been working at the prison ranch. A trusty, he had been breaking broncs there and had been allowed a certain amount of freedom. He had ridden away from the prison ranch and was reported missing at the evening check-up of prisoners. He had been gone several days. The warden still refused to believe that Chet Kilbourn would not return.

"Chet Kilbourn," the warden was quoted as saying, "will come back of his own accord."

Lant poured himself a stiff drink and gulped it down. He needed it. What had gotten into Chet to make him pull off a fool stunt like that when Lant and the other Pool ranchers were working hard to get him pardoned? Lant had risked his own life and freedom only a few hours ago in a desperate attempt to get evidence to hand over to the lawyer. He hadn't time yet to look through that stuff in the canvas sack that he had taken from Cato Munday's big safe, but he was hoping, gambling desperately, that he'd find what he wanted in the gambler's private papers. Evidence that would clear Chet's name and get a pardon for that wild, reckless young cowpuncher. Now Chet had violated the trust of the warden at Deer Lodge, as fine a gent as ever gave a cowboy prisoner a chance to make good. And Chet had broken prison.

Lant felt Cato Munday's yellow eyes watching him. He turned around slowly, fighting to keep his self-control. This was no time, he warned himself, to go off half-cocked.

The gambler was sipping his strong black coffee and looking again at Lant's spurs. There was a brown stain on his sleek black hair where the doctor had taken a few stitches in his ripped scalp and painted it with iodine.

"I was just remembering," said the gambler's flat-toned voice, "you and Chet had your spurs made alike with your brand on the silver conchos. I'm wondering if Chet was in town last night."

Lant's jaw muscles knotted. There was nothing for him to say. Nothing at all. Nothing he could do. He forced a grin.

"Like as not, Chet went to see a girl somewhere. There's some good-lookin' girls in the Deer Lodge Valley. Or if there was a rodeo near there, he'd take it in, then come ridin' back to the prison ranch an' laugh it off. No, Chet wasn't nowheres near Cottonwood last night or he'd have let the wide world know it. Chet travels thataway. High, wide and handsome."

Cato Munday smiled thinly. "Somebody paid me a little visit around midnight. Gutted my safe. He made only one mistake. He should have killed me. Considering the deal from all angles, it might be a wise idea for that safe-robbing gent to return everything he took away with him. The jingle of your spurs recalls something to mind that I might pass on to Sheriff Powers for what it's worth to the law. I'll wait twenty-four hours. Then there'll be a bounty on Chet's hide."

The gambler went back to his

newspapers, turning to the sporting page.

Lant Kilbourn paid for his drink. He told Simms to have the train of empty cattle cars at the stockyards siding at daybreak the day after tomorrow. Then he walked out of the saloon, his spur jingling sounding loud and taunting in his ears. He got his horse and rode into the cold gray dawn, letting the drizzle sting his eyes. He felt sick inside.

He dared not go near Alkali Creek where Jerkline's freight outfit would be camped. Instead he headed back for the Pool roundup camp, his heart as heavy as the lead in his six-shooter. He wondered if he hadn't made a mistake in not crowding Munday into a gunplay and taking his chances on killing the gambler, providing he could beat that fast gunslinger to the draw. Those damned spurs! Munday knew that Chet wasn't the man who had robbed his safe. Chet was slimmer, shorter. But Cato Munday was going to accuse Chet unless Lant fetched back that canvas sack with its stolen contents intact. Bill Elias had sent Chet to the pen. Elias would put up a big bounty on Chet's scalp. Munday would add to it. McConnico and Jepson would sweeten it.

III

Between town and the roundup camp, Lant Kilbourn met Sheriff Puck Powers and a couple of deputized possemen.

Puck was a thick-set man with reddish hair and a humorous grin that traveled into his eyes. But those eyes could turn cold and dangerous and Puck Powers was one law officer who could not be bought off, bluffed or scared away.

"I got word nearly a week ago, Lant, that Chet had strayed off," the sheriff said. "Somebody cleaned out the Owl last night. Cato Munday will try to hang it on Chet. So if you happen to cut the sign of that bronc-twistin' kid brother of yours, tell him to come in and give himself up before some bounty hunter cuts him down."

"I've bin tryin' to figger out, Puck, why he run away from the prison ranch. He must have had a mighty powerful reason."

"He made some wild talk when he got sent up, Lant. How he was comin' back to take care of Elias and Jepson for framin' him. And how he'd manhandle Cato Munday, then ride to Twin Buttes and drag it out o' big Mike McConnico. It was wild talk, Lant. But it'll all be remembered now. Sendin' Chet Kilbourn to the pen didn't knock his horns off none."

Sheriff Puck Powers rode on with his deputies. Lant wouldn't have been surprised to find Chet at the roundup wagon. But Chet had not been there. And the cowmen who made up the Pool, some of them grizzled and old enough to be Lant's father, eyed the big wagon boss with cold-eyed uneasiness.

"It looks like you shore played holy Ned last night, Lant," one of them put it into words as Lant

changed to a fresh horse and joined them in the mess tent.

Lant's breakfast tasted like so much sawdust and the strong steaming-hót coffee could not melt the cold ache inside his belly.

"What's this about Chet bustin' out o' Deer Lodge?" asked another cowman when Lant made no comment on his last night's lone-handed play. "You an' Chet ain't tryin' to git the whole damned Pool outfit into trouble by some kind o' hair-brained fancy gun-slingin'? We don't want no range war. We done talked 'er over, Lant. Some of us got wives and families to think about. Got our li'l o' ranches, such as they are. We kin hang an' rattle, make 'er go somehow, without gittin' tangled in no gun-slingin' range war. We know your daddy got bushwhacked an' Chet got railroaded into the pen. And we know how you feel. But it looks like you're draggin' us into a shore harmful mess."

Lant Kilbourn had been squatting on his hunkers with his tin plate heaped with grub, his cup of black coffee half-emptied. He got to his feet now, walked outside and emptied his plate and cup, fetched them back and dumped them into the big dishpan with a loud clatter that smashed the uneasy silence.

"Why don't you come out with it?" he said, his voice bleak. "I'm not ramroddin' your Pool outfit. Ain't that it? And you don't need to put it into words. It's there in the coyote look in your eyes.

"Every damned man of you will be lickin' the boots of Elias or that sheep-stinkin' Jepson. Elias, that's crowded you to the wall, the cattle-rustlin' son of a snake. Yeah, and some of you got smart and sneaked off to Twin Buttes to borrow money from that big black mine-saltin' crook, Mike McConnico. And some of you went to that tinhorn gambler, Cato Munday.

"Munday bought your mortgages from Elias and McConnico and Jepson. Or he pokered those same gents out of your mortgage papers. And that gamblin' man has you all in his sack. And if you think you got the ghost of a chance to git an hour's extension on your notes or mortgages, then you're dumber than you're actin' now.

"Yonder's the Pool herd. A big un. Cars ordered. If them cattle is shipped, every dollar they fetch on the Chicago market will go to Cato Munday. And it won't be enough to save your nester outfits. Your wives and families that you talk about won't have a roof over their heads or grub to eat. When Cato Munday tightens the clamps he'll show you what's meant by that sayin': 'As cold as a gambler's heart.'

"A few nights ago you was all usin' your cryin' towels. And when I told you how I'd save your outfits you slapped me on the back and shook my hand and all but give three cheers.

"I taken the risks. I never asked a single man of you to share any part of the job. And I didn't know Chet had run away from Deer Lodge. Chet had no part of it. I was lone-handed

and I got the job done. Now you're scared. To save your two-bit hides, some of you will squeal on me. I kin read it in your eyes.

"So, gentlemen of the Nester Pool, I'm cuttin' my string of ponies, cuttin' my K cattle. Your cars are ordered. Ship your cattle and pay through the nose to that tinhorn gambler. Because he'll have your mortgages and your due-notes and your gamblin' I O U's back in his big cracker box safe. Squeal your guts out. You ain't worth fightin' for. I'm cuttin' my string from your Coyote Pool!"

Lant's voice was harsh. His eyes were hard and cold and gray. He walked out of the mess tent and into the rain, leaving a heavy silence behind him.

It took a couple of hours for Lant to work his K steers out of the day herd. He drifted them off into a coulee where the feed was good, cut his string of horses and loaded his tarp-covered bed on a pack horse. He refused the lukewarm, half-scared offers of help from the younger Pool cowhands and did his work alone. Then he threw his string of saddle horses in with his bunch of steers and headed for the Kilbourn home ranch.

The raw wind with its gray drizzle was at his back and he had covered considerable distance when he threw his cattle and horses into a fenced pasture at dusk. He caught a fresh horse and unloaded his bed at a little log cabin that was deserted. This was somebody's homestead that had been taken for debt and now belonged to Elias or Jepson or perhaps to Cato Munday. It was used as a pasture by freighters like Jerkline.

Lant was riding around the fence to make certain there were no broken gaps in it when he heard the jangle of bells and saw Jerkline's freight outfit coming down the slippery road off the benchland. Brakes set and rough locks on the wheels, the outfit came down the steep slant that was as slippery as grease.

In the gathering dusk and drizzle the freight outfit took on an unreal, distorted, shadowy appearance in the drizzle Jerkline's blacksnake popping, Two Dog Moore riding back and forth along the sixteen-horse-string team to keep the tugs tightened on that down grade where a pile-up meant disaster if the horses got tangled in the lead bars. It took skill and experience with a jerkline, perfect teamwork between the freighter and his swamper, horses that pulled together and gave the best that was in their stout hearts.

Few freighters would come down that long steep grade in the dusk when the road was greasy and a slack tug or stretcher or lead bar meant a pile-up that would cripple the horses and overturn the heavily loaded wagons. The lead team lunged into their collars, the other teams following, keeping those chain tugs tight, the lead bars up, so that double-trees and single-trees stayed level against the steady pull of the chain traces.

Blacksnakes were cracking. Jerkline's leathery-lunged voice was sounding above the squeal of brake shoes and rattle of chain harness and

the jangle of a hundred little bronze bells.

"Tighten up! Hell an' Damnation! Beer an' Whiskey!"

He shouted their names on down to his stout wheel team, called Broke and Hungry. The high-boxed wagons had wagon sheets of heavy canvas roped down to protect the loads. The white-topped caboose was lurching and swaying. Two Dog Moore's two shepherd dogs trotted back and forth as the swamper rode his gentle horse along the string of sixteen horses.

On the nigh wheeler was Jerkline, who bragged that he never dropped trail, never left a wagon stuck in the gumbo mud. He'd shotgun a hill as he was shotgunning this steep grade now, his leaders trotting and the string and swing teams picking up the stiffer gait. Jerkline on his saddled nigh wheeler, handling his jerkline that guided his lead team and ran down through big ring keepers fastened to the hames of the other teams, the end of its long line gripped in the freighter's big hairy, scabbed hand.

There were tons of grub and whiskey and beer in the wagons behind him and one wagon was loaded with cases of stick dynamite and metal kegs and cans of blasting powder. A full load of sudden death and destruction in that wagon at Jerkline's back. Enough powder and dynamite to blow this whole outfit, wagons, horses and men, into eternity in scattered bits. But Jerkline handled powder with the same tipsy carelessness that he handled sacks of flour and beans, with even less care than cased beer. For beer bottles, claimed Jerkline, bust.

Little Two Dog Moore rode his gentle white horse with his two shepherd dogs ranging alongside. Two Dog herded sheep for Anse Jepson off and on when he and Jerkline had one of their quarrels. He was crippled in both legs so that he limped when the weather got like it was now. Little leathery-faced, kind-hearted Two Dog who had a terrible and deadly fear of powder, riding chalky-faced now in the dark gray rain with a prayer moving his stiff lips and that horrible fear of powder gripping his heart. His blacksnake cracking. The blacksnake with its wide buckskin popper that never touched the hide of a horse save to knock off a horsefly.

Two Dog's prayers, stiff-lipped, silent. Jerkline's leather-lunged profanity.

And back in the swaying, tossing, lurching caboose was a little gray man with mild blue eyes and a painstakingly colored old meerschaum pipe and a partly emptied bottle. Lost in dreams, he hummed softly to himself as he kept his seat on the rear bunk. Little Waldo Leandro Smith, journeyman printer, newspaperman, drunkard, dreamer of splendid dreams.

The jerkline outfit moved down the long, greasy, treacherous grade, leveling out at the foot of the hill to come at last to a sluggish stop in the rutted, muddy gumbo.

Horses were steaming in the dark gray dusk and drizzle. Brakes were

kicked off. Rough-lock chains were knocked loose with a single jack sledge.

Two Dog wiped the cold sweat from his rain-washed face and sucked his breath in with a sob. Fear still glazed his sky-blue eyes.

Jerkline, shaking his matted mane and beard free of rain, swung to the ground. He opened the lid of the big jockey box where hub wrenches and axle grease were kept. Pulling the cork on a quart bottle with his big strong teeth, he handed the bottle to his little cripple-legged swamper. His voice lifted in a bellowing shout.

"All out, back there, Waldo! Crawl into that slicker and them gum boots and make a freight hand! All out fer a drink of whiskey and no man eats supper till the last horse is grained. Fill them nose bags, Waldo Leandro! Two Dog, don't go trompin' in the mud till you git them gum boots on. You git rheumatiz in them joints. Had to hit a lope when that rough lock slipped on the powder wagon and that brake shoe burnt through block and steel. It was slipp'ry as greased hell. Lemme at that likker, Two Dog. Hollerin' dries a man's neck out inside."

Lant Kilbourn rode up out of the gray drizzle. Jerkline handed him the bottle and they both pretended not to see the terrible sick look on Two Dog Moore's face as his eyes stared at the broken rough-lock chain and the burned-out brake shoes on the powder wagon.

"I hope and trust," said the mild voice of Waldo Leandro Smith, "that no rain has seeped in on my printing press."

"You ain't knocked it in the head, Jerkline?" Lant asked.

"Nope. Waldo's all right. You orter read what he wrote about Two Dog. He's tacklin' a story about me next. Seen a feller that knowed you today, Lant. He's lookin' good. Full of hell as ever. He'll show up again." Jerkline meant Chet. Lant grinned, stiff-lipped, and nodded.

IV

When Lant Kilbourn said he wanted his canvas sack with its loot from Cato Munday's safe, Jerkline squirmed uneasily and his bloodshot green eyes shifted.

"Chet took it, Lant. Seems like he'd bin to the Pool wagon after you cut your string there. You know Chet. That boy'd cut off his right arm with a dull knife fer you. He must've went 'round and 'round with them Pool gents. And he said that nobody was goin' to hang anything on you. I don't know how he figgered me into it, but he told me to hand over that sack of stuff or he'd git tough. And I didn't want Chet gittin' tough. He took the sack of stuff an' rode off, whistlin' gay an' free. Chet says for you to hightail it back to the Pool wagon where you belong. Chet and the perfessor here, Waldo, they had theirselves a time with some of the stuff in the sack."

The two bunks in the caboose were littered with a small hand printing press and scrapped paper. Waldo Leandro Smith handed Lant a copy

of what he said was a trial issue of the Twin Buttes *Tribune*. The black ink was still fresh on the paper.

"WHEN WOLVES GATHER!" read the large black headline. Under four separate headings was a brief outline concerning the misdeeds of four men: Munday, Elias, McConnico and Jepson. Munday was styled as a crooked gambler, Elias a land-grabbing cattle rustler, McConnico a crooked mine promoter who "salted" mines to sell to his victims. Jepson, the article said, could be sent to prison for fraudulent land deals. Those were the four wolves who gathered at the Owl to split their killings and gamble the proceeds in long poker sessions.

"There is more high explosive in that sheet, sir," Waldo Smith said mildly, "than there is loaded on Jerkline's powder wagon. Your brother, Chet, has taken copies of the trial edition to Cottonwood. And in that canvas sack he carries sufficient authentic proof to back every word and punctuation mark in the accusations outlined in the *Tribune*. Let those wolves sue Waldo Leandro Smith for libel if they dare. I'll need no attorney-at-law to plead my case. I hew to the mark, sir, and let the chips fall where they may. You'll join me in a small libation?"

The little ink-stained man put his meerschaum pipe in a large leather plush-lined case and snapped it shut. He pulled the cork on his bottle and offered it to Lant Kilbourn. Waldo Smith's smile was as gentle as that of a child. But there was a tone to his voice as clear and unblurred as the metal bells on Jerkline's string team. And in his mild blue eyes showed tiny bright sparks.

Lant took a drink. Chet and this little mild-mannered codger with printer's ink staining his silvery hair had taken the deal away from him.

"If I was you, Lant," said Jerkline, while they stood crowded into the caboose where Two Dog was starting supper, "I'd hightail it on back to the Pool outfit. This is goin' to turn into one of them nights when a herd won't lay on a bed ground. Them cattle is bound to drift. And without you there to ramrod the outfit, they'll let that herd scatter and spill all over the country. Them nesters won't pen enough steers at the yards to fill half a dozen cars. Them fellers got a leetle worried an' fretful an' scared. You bowed up an' pawed dirt in their faces, hooked right an' left an' horned your way out. They was already regretful when Chet showed up there. You can't quit them pore suckers in a tight, Lant. You kin make it back by second-guard time. You're still ramroddin' that Pool outfit, Lant."

Two Dog Moore piled a thick steak, fried spuds and navy beans on a plate and told Lant to get outside of it. There were hot biscuits and the coffee was fresh and strong. Lant wolfed his grub, washed it down with coffee, and rolled a cigarette.

The two shepherd dogs lay stretched out, their wet coats steaming, on Two Dog's bunk. The caboose was crowded, the air thick with the mingled odors of cooking food, wet

dogs, sweaty men, whiskey, tobacco smoke and printer's ink. Lant grinned and said he reckoned that he'd wore out his welcome here, that they might be able to use the space he'd leave in the caboose.

Jerkline was lighting an extra lantern. He was going out to tap a barrel of whiskey. He had a hammer, a dull-edged cold chisel, a small gimlet and a short length of small rubber hose about the size of a thick pencil. He would knock loose one of the barrel hoops, bore a hole with the gimlet, siphon off a bucket full of whiskey, then plug the hole with a wooden peg and put the barrel hoop back in place to cover the plugged hole. Freighter's shrinkage, the saloonmen called the loss of a gallon or two of the barreled whiskey.

Lant mounted a fresh horse, left his other horses and cattle in the pasture and told Jerkline to carry his bedroll along and to let Waldo Leandro Smith use it. And with a quart of whiskey and a copy of Waldo Smith's *Tribune* in his chaps pocket, Lant headed back for the Pool roundup. He felt better with grub in his belly. And his temper had cooled off hours ago.

Those little ranchers who made up the Pool outfit were his friends. Some of them had families. They needed the money this shipment of cattle would fetch in. And while they were fair-to-middling cowhands, Lant doubted if they'd have sense enough to turn out to the last man and start drifting the cattle on to the stockyards. Handling a big herd on a black, rain-filled night was no easy job. Lant was glad he was going to help them.

As he figured, there had only been four men on first guard. He found the others at camp. Though it was an hour past second-guard time nobody on first guard had ridden into camp to call the relief.

"Pull on your slickers," Lant told them. "Fork your night horses. We'll be lucky if we kin locate the herd."

But they got a lucky break or else Lant's cowhand savvy guided them to the drifting herd that was a vast moving black blot in the rain-drenched night. He told them to bunch the herd, keep the edges thrown in close, and sing to 'em. He rode up on the point and when they came to a barbed-wire fence he knew it was the big Elias private pasture at the edge of town where the Elias roundup always held their beef herd the night before they shipped.

Lant got half a dozen men to help him and they tore down the fence for a hundred yards and drifted the herd through the wide gap and kept on. Bill Elias would raise particular hell about that fence cutting and trespassing, but the Pool herd would be in the yards by then and the big native steers would be prodded up the chute into the cars and on their way before Elias found out about it.

Lant had located the nighthawk and told that owl-eyed guardian of the remuda to fetch his cavvy on with the cattle so that when a horse got leg-weary in that heavy going, the rider could catch a fresh mount.

The rain got in under a man's slicker, soaked his clothes and filled his boots, chilling him to the bone. And a drink of raw whiskey was priceless. But Lant never pulled the cork on his bottle. It would taste all the better and cheer up those soaked, shivering cowhands about daybreak when they got the cattle penned. Lant Kilbourn was not the man to sneak even a small drink while his cowhand crew went without. And that one lone quart would allow no more than one good drink apiece when it was passed around.

The night was too black to bother with gates where the cattle would pile up along the fence. So Lant took a couple of men and loped on ahead to tear down the fence on the far side of the pasture. He grinned to himself as he pictured the wrath of Bill Elias.

It was a long, cold, wet job but the time passed fast enough as Lant kept his herd moving. He had little time to worry about his brother. Chet Kilbourn was wild and reckless and a gambling fool, but in a tight he had a cool head and steady nerves and the boldness of his ways won for him more often than he lost. Chet must have a strong reason for riding away from the prison ranch. He had shown up here, figured out Lant's game, and now was making some kind of a bold, mighty dangerous play for big stakes. Chet played for keeps. And Chet had done a neat job of taking over the blame for that Owl holdup. There was no guessing what his next move was going to be.

The rain slacked off and there was the first faint gray streak of dawn in the sky when Lant and his Pool outfit reached the stockyards a few miles from town. And it was daybreak by the time the cattle were in the pens and the locomotive with its long string of empty cattle cars was shunted in on the stockyards siding and the train crew had spotted the first car at the loading chute.

There were times when the train crew and the cowpunchers did not hit it off any too well. This, Lant figured, when he saw the conductor and brakeman and engine crew talking together, promised to be one of those ornery train crews. He yanked his hat down and rode over to have it out now with them.

"Are you Lant Kilbourn?" snapped the conductor.

"You called it, mister. What's on your mind?"

"Simms canceled this train a couple of hours ago. Then a tall young cowpuncher with black hair and whiskers and a six-shooter in his hand took over. He knocked Simms silly and told us to get this train to the yards or he'd gun-whip us. He said you'd be responsible. So if you want these cars, sign for 'em here and now."

Lant grinned and signed for the train. That damned bootlicking Simms—taking orders from Cato Munday. That Chet!

"That road-agent gun-slinger said to give you his regards and tell you he'd meet you in jail," the conductor went on. "He put a couple of jugs of whiskey in the caboose for you.

Said you fellers might need a snort to take the chill out of your guts. Loaded his horse in one of the cars and rode the engine here, with his six-shooter in the engineer's back. When we got here he unloaded his horse and rode off while you was pennin' the first of your cattle: What is he? Some kind of an outlaw?"

"One of the best kind," answered Lant. Grinning, he headed down the tracks for the caboose.

Lant rode back with a couple of gallon jugs. He passed the first jug around and warned his crew not to get drunk. The first cattle were going up the slanting loading chute, urged up the cleated chute by prod poles, when Sheriff Puck Powers rode up.

"It's against the law, Lant, to load cattle without there's a stock inspector here to pass on every head," the lawman said sternly. "You know that."

Lant's jaw muscles knotted and his eyes, bloodshot from loss of sleep and being whipped by the rain, were a cold gray.

"The stock inspector was notified in plenty time, Puck. I'm not forced to hold cattle here in the yards without feed till he gits around to showin' up on the job. These cattle kin be inspected along the line when we unload to feed between here and Chicago. Simms canceled this train. The same man that bullied Simms into that dirty trick is keepin' the stock inspector hid out. No damned tinhorn like Cato Munday kin push us around thataway, Puck."

"Ain't you a little high-handed, Lant?"

"I'm loadin' these Pool cattle, regardless."

"Then I'll inspect 'em for brands," said Sheriff Puck Powers. "Don't let me forget, though, when we're done loadin' that I've got a bench warrant for your arrest to serve on you. Let's have a shot of that hard likker. Then me'n' you will tally these steers as they're loaded."

"What am I charged with, Puck?"

"Murder. Simms was shot where his galluses cross while he was sittin' at his telegraph key. Lucky there's a barber in town that has helped Simms out from time to time and kin handle the telegraph and tend to the trains. Or there could have bin a train wreck.

"Simms spread the news in town that you'd beat him up and shoved the crew of this cattle train around with a gun. You and Chet. Somebody got me out o' bed and said I'd better git uptown and on the job. I found Simms shot in the back, deader'n a doornail. Cato Munday swore out the warrants for you and Chet. I hope you boys kin prove that Munday is a liar when he says in court that he was an eyewitness to the killin'. Seen Chet?"

"I haven't seen Chet since he went to the pen, Puck," Lant answered quietly. "That's no lie. And I kin prove that I haven't left this roundup outfit. Never mind, Puck. I'll go with you when we git

these cattle loaded. Want my gun?"

"Better git out your tally book." Sheriff Puck Powers ignored that last question. "Call them brands as they go in. I'll check with you. How many you shippin', Lant?"

"I cut mine back. They'll go with the second shipment."

They got out tally books and stubby pencils. There was a hard bright twinkle in the sheriff's eyes.

"Elias had better hiré another fence crew. I hear that beef-pasture fence of his fell down in a couple places. What's the iron on that big brockle-faced ox, Lant?"

Cattle bawled. Cowpunchers yipped and worked with prod poles. Riders in the muddy yards kept moving through from the main corrals into the smaller pens. Mud and sweat and empty bellies. Lant Kilbourn and Sheriff Puck Powers marking down the tally under each Pool brand. Another car loaded and the bull bar slammed and fastened. The locomotive chugging. Cars jolting as the next empty was spotted at the loading chute.

Lant kept thinking of Simms, the harmless, weak-spined, talkative he-gossip of Cottonwood. Shot in the back. Simms didn't deserve an end like that. Chet might have given the station agent a fist whipping, but he hadn't shot Simms in the back. Puck Powers knew that as well as Lant did. But what had Simms done to provoke that cold-blooded murder? It went further and deeper than an argument over a train of cattle cars.

Cato Munday had given Lant twenty-four hours to return that sack of stuff. Those twenty-four hours would be up long before these cattle were loaded and on the way. Was that why Puck hadn't heard Lant's question about handing over his gun? Was there some trouble coming before they got the last of the Pool beef loaded? Mebbeso.

Another car was loaded. The train crew was spotting the next empty. Sheriff Puck Powers, reaching in his pocket for a fresh cigar, pulled out a folded copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's Twin Buttes *Tribune.*

"This was shoved under my office door, Lant. Seen it? There's just plain dynamite in this sheet. Who in thunder is this Waldo Leandro Smith, editor?"

"It's dynamite, all right," agreed Lant. "Waldo Leandro Smith, editor. Hell of a name, now, ain't it?"

With a grin, Lant handed the smudgy hand-printed paper back to the sheriff.

"It'll blow them fellers sky high if he kin prove what he's got printed. Which he says here that he can. There was a copy of this thing on Simms' desk. Blood spilled all over it."

V

Sheriff Puck Powers, working as brand inspector there at the top of the loading chute, kept covertly

watching Lant Kilbourn. He had half a notion to tear up that bench warrant here and now. Puck was no man's political tool. Siding with Lant and Chet Kilbourn and these little ranchers who made up the Pool was going to lose him the coming election.

Elias, who owned the big Box E outfit on Box Elder Creek, swung a lot of votes among his cowpunchers and men who owed him money. He'd vote every last man of them to get Puck Powers out of office. Even as big Mike McConnico would vote his hard-rock miners at Twin Buttes. And lanky Anse Jepson would vote his sheepherders, camp tenders, farm hands and everybody he could round up in Little Basin, while Cato Munday controlled the votes of Cottonwood.

Election was only a couple of weeks distant. Buck those four big powers in this strip of Montana cow country and you were licked before you started. Those men had their own candidate for sheriff, in case Puck Powers got out of line. The genial, square-shooting sheriff had been warned by Elias, McConnico and Jepson. And no later than this morning when Simms had been found murdered at his telegraph desk, Cato Munday had given Puck a flat-toned warning that left no room for compromise.

"Get Lant and Chet Kilbourn and don't waste time. Or you'll be hunting a new job."

Bill Elias had railroaded Chet to the pen. The Kilbourn boys were not rustling cattle from anybody. But the Pool cowmen had about decided to take the matter up with the cattlemen's association and have either Chet or Lant Kilbourn appointed stock inspector. There had been a lot of cattle rustling and horse stealing. The Pool men said that the two Kilbourn boys were the men to get the job done.

Puck Powers had been undersheriff under Sheriff Jake Kilbourn, father of Lant and Chet. Sheriff Kilbourn, hot on the trail of some cattle rustlers, had been waylaid and killed in the badlands and Puck had stepped into the dead man's job of sheriff. He said he'd do his best to get the men who had bushwhacked Jake Kilbourn.

It had been Chet who openly precipitated more trouble when he went on a fighting spree. With his spurs let out to the town hole and his Stetson slanted at a fighting angle, Chet had accused Bill Elias, Anse Jepson, Mike McConnico and Cato Munday of being the men behind the murder of Sheriff Jake Kilbourn. Chet had tried to crowd them into a gunplay. But it would have been suicide for any man to go for his gun while wild Chet Kilbourn had a six-shooter in his hand.

So they had taken on another more subtle and less dangerous way of removing Chet Kilbourn from circulation. He was framed on the cattle-rustling charge. Sent to prison. But on the witness stand Chet had had his say.

"Sheriff Jake Kilbourn had

enough on you four buzzards to send you over the road," he had charged bitterly. "So you had him killed. But I'll come back from that Deer Lodge pen. And you'll have me and Lant to kill. And, listen, you four slimy snakes, that'll take a lot of doin'."

Now Chet was off somewhere distributing copies of Waldo Leandro Smith's newspaper. And somewhere Chet had the absolute proof to back all the ugly accusations in this little hand-printed sheet. Chet was crowding the issue. In his headlong reckless way that young cowhand was carrying a high-handed fight to the enemy. Lant, eight years older and more level-headed, had wanted to play it more carefully.

"Let 'em railroad you to the pen, Chet," he had urged his brother. "I'll git you out before you've had time to get used to the place. And I'll do some detective work, here in the badlands. You might contact some renegade at Deer Lodge who knows somethin'. Take it easy, Chet."

But telling Chet to take it easy was like trying to stop a stampede lone-handed with a red lantern.

Puck Powers knew about Chet commandeering the train Simms had canceled. He talked to the train crew while they spotted cars.

"Simms was alive when Chet loaded his horse in an empty cattle car and rode the engine here to the yards," Powers told Lant. "They said he headed off in the opposite direction from town. And you haven't been near Cottonwood accordin' to the Pool men. Where do you reckon Chet went, Lant?"

"Peddlin' his papers." Lant grinned flatly. "Yonder comes the stock inspector. Elias and Jepson are with him."

"You got any of their cattle in this herd, Lant?"

"Not unless we picked 'em up last night in the dark. I had the herd trimmed and ready."

It was drizzling rain again. The stockyards were slimy and muddy and the cattle hard to work. Horses slithered and slipped in the mud. Tempers were none too good. The men had been up all night, working on whiskey. No hot grub for breakfast.

There had been no time to hold up the herd outside the yards and cut for strays. They could have picked up some Box E cattle last night when they came their ruthless way through Bill Elias' beef pasture. It wasn't a cheering thought.

Bill Elias was part California Mexican. A short, thick-set man with bowed legs and a paunch. His iron-gray hair and mustache were coarse and bristly. His speckled eyes were a mixture of gray and black, set under scowling black brows. He was a good cowman and his was the only outfit in that part of Montana that worked Mexicans. He had half a dozen with him now. They were said to be renegades and tough hands, out-

laws from Mexico. Some of them were mixed breeds.

Anse Jepson ran cattle and sheep. He was lanky, loose-framed, with big, heavy-knuckled hands. He had huge feet shoved far into his stirrups and sat his horse like a loose bag of bones. His nose was large and his muddy-colored hair was thin, lifeless. His eyes, red-rimmed and bloodshot, were pale green. His voice was nasal and harsh. He had a habit of keeping his sheepherders and camp tenders in debt to him and made them buy their clothes and tobacco and bedding at his ranch store, charging them three or four times the regular prices. He ran sheep, he said, to protect his range against Elias and the Pool ranchers. He was crafty and underhanded, ornery and dangerous when crossed.

Lou Lupton, the stock inspector, was a big man with a growing paunch and the red-veined face of a hard drinker. His voice was whiskey-husked, his small blue eyes hard, cruel and treacherous. Lou Lupton was the man Cato Munday and the others would run against Puck Powers for sheriff. Lupton was as crooked as Puck Powers was straight. He had killed a few men and traveled on his tough reputation as a gun fighter. There was blood in his eye now.

Lupton was the man who had arrested Chet Kilbourn for cattle rustling. The stock inspector had, Chet swore, planted the evidence himself that had framed Chet and sent him to the pen for rustling.

There was no love lost between Lant Kilbourn and Lou Lupton. Sheriff Puck Powers scowled.

"Keep your shirt on now, Lant," he warned in a low voice. "Don't go off half-cocked."

"I won't, Puck. But if that big glory hunter makes a move for that notched gun he packs, I'll gut-shoot him, sure as hell. It's bin my guess from the start that it was Lou Lupton that shot my daddy in the back. I'm goin' to have to kill that big jasper sooner or later, or git killed a-tryin'."

"The sign ain't right. Lant. Take 'er easy. Let me deal 'em."

Elias was scowling blackly. Jepson's grin had an ugly, cunning leer to it. Stock Inspector Lou Lupton glared hard at Lant and the sheriff.

"It's agin' the law to load cattle without inspection," wheezed Lupton. "Damn well you know it. Anyhow, you're supposed to be under arrest, Kilbourn."

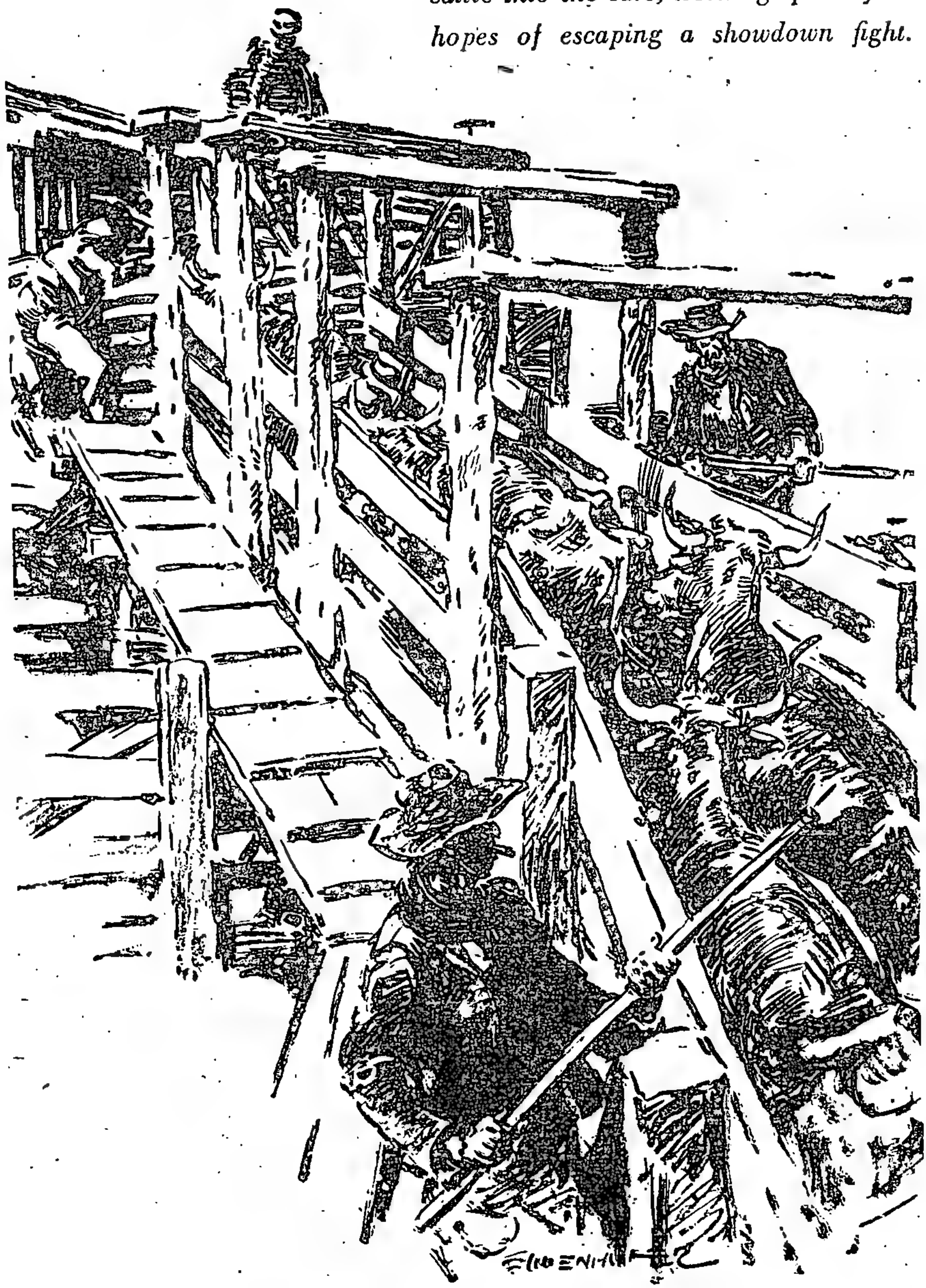
"I'm inspectin' these cattle, Lou," Powers said quietly. "And here's what I think of that bench warrant Cato Munday had sworn out for Lant Kilbourn."

Taking the bench warrant from his pocket, the sheriff ripped it to shreds.

"I've got cattle in this herd," said Elias. "Lant Kilbourn and these nesters tore my beef pasture fence down last night. I had some steers in that pasture, feedin' 'em for my butcher shop at Cottonwood."

"If you got any Box E cattle in

The men of the Nester Pool prodded cattle into the cars, working speedily in hopes of escaping a showdown fight.



this pool herd," said Lant, "they'll be cut back."

Lou Lupton cursed in his whiskey voice. "Unload what cars you've got loaded, mister. I'll look 'em over. Jepson claims you've got some of his cattle in your hen-yard Pool herd. These cattle don't git loaded without my inspection. You've got no right to horn in on this, Puck."

Powers grinned mirthlessly. "Take Elias and Jepson," he said bluntly, "and them Box E cowhands, and git back to town. Claw for that fancy-notched gun you pack, Lou, and I'll kill you. Keep those men out o' the yards or they'll git hurt. I'm the only law that counts here and now. If you don't believe me, fill your hand!"

Lant and the Pool men had their hands near their guns. Lant's voice cut like a knife.

"Lou Lupton is my meat, Puck. I'll gut-shoot him, then prove later that he murdered my father."

Anything could happen now. Lou Lupton had killed several men and had cut notches on the handle of his gun to tally his killings. But he had not given one of his victims a real fighting break. And he wasn't taking any chances with Puck Powers or Lant Kilbourn.

Puck reached into his pocket and pulled out the folded copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's Twin Buttes *Tribune*. His eyes twinkled as he shoved it at the stock inspector.

"Read that, Lou, if you haven't seen the latest. By the look on their faces I'd gamble that Elias and Jepson got their early copies. This Waldo Leandro Smith calls his shots."

"Proof to back all he says," added Lant, "came out of Cato Munday's safe. Walk slow, gents, and speak easy."

Lant lifted his voice to a shout. "Keep them cattle a-comin', cow servants. We're losin' time. If them Box E things bother you, take to 'em."

Elias, Jepson, Stock Inspector Lou Lupton and the Box E cowpunchers sat their horses outside the yards. They talked among themselves in low tones, while Lant and Puck Powers covertly watched them.

Lant called out to his Pool cowpunchers to work the herd for Box E or Jepson J cattle and cut back any they found. The work of loading went on in the mud and drizzle. Bawling cattle and shouting cowhands worked on whiskey. The men of the train crew were interested onlookers.

The mess wagon and bed wagon pulled in on the river about noon.

Elias, Jepson, Lou Lupton and the Box E men finally pulled out with about forty or fifty head of cattle the Pool herd had picked up last night in the Elias beef pasture.

A few men would ride over to the camp and wolf hot grub and steaming black coffee spiked with whiskey. Changing to fresh horses, they'd lope back. Working in the mud and drizzle slowed them down,

but before dark they had the last cattle car loaded, the bull bar slammed into place, the train ready to pull out. The cowpunchers who were going to Chicago with the cattle shipment threw their bedrolls and war sacks into the caboose. The locomotive bell clanged, the whistle howled mournfully in the gray dusk, and the Pool herd was on its way to the Chicago stockyards.

"Go saddle your town horses, cowhands," ordered Lant. "We're paintin' Cottonwood red tonight!"

VI

As one Pool cowpuncher put it, there wasn't much to daub, there at Cottonwood, even if a man had plenty of red paint. They had no money to spend for gambling or booze or at the honkatonk. Almost to a man, they were in debt to Cato Munday, even though the gambler no longer had their mortgages and notes and I O U's locked up in his big safe. Their credit was good for drinks at a couple of the smaller places where Lant took them. They had shed their wet clothes that were grimed by stockyards muck, washed up and shaved and put on their town duds.

"Give these gents what they want," Lant told the saloonmen at the Last Chance, the Maverick and the Silver Dollar. "Mark it on your books. They're good for it."

But none of them went into the Owl, or the Cato Munday-owned honkatonk. They had not come to town to gamble or dance. They wore their guns and they were looking around for any Box E or Jepson J cowhands who might be in town and on the prod.

The older cowmen of the Pool had stayed at camp. Sheriff Puck Powers had stayed with them there. Lant knew how to keep his men in line. And when cowboys are in town, a wise sheriff has business elsewhere.

But there seemed to be no Box E or Jepson J cowpunchers in town. There was no sign of Elias or Jepson. Stock Inspector Lou Lupton was nowhere around. Nor was Cato Munday at the Owl. The town was quiet. Too quiet to suit Lant. There was something wrong.

Lant figured he had found the answer when he saw the freshly painted reward dodger, a huge placard three feet square, tacked on the wall above the back bar at the Owl. It offered two thousand dollars, dead or alive, for Chet Kilbourn.

The man at the feed barn verified Lant's fears. The Box E and Jepson J outfits had turned into man-hunting posses. Stock Inspector Lou Lupton headed the big posse of men who had ridden out of town just before the Pool outfit had ridden in. Elias and Jepson had ridden away together. Cato Munday had departed in his fancy-top buggy, driving his team of trotters. Elias, Jepson and Munday had left for Twin Buttes, fifty miles away, Lou Lupton's posse riding armed escort.

"Cato Munday," said the barn man, "was askin' questions about that little drunk that had a printin' press set up here at the barn. The little cuss that Two Dog Moore and Jerkline took along with their freight outfit."

That was all Lant needed to know. "It looks bad," he told the younger Pool men. "Don't come along with me unless you're ready to mix into trouble."

Only one of the Pool men dropped out and he headed back for camp to take the news to Sheriff Puck Powers and the older Pool cowmen that Lant Kilbourn was really on the warpath.

The storm had cleared away finally, the gray sky breaking. The stars and a round, cold white moon showed as the clouds scudded across the sky.

Lant and his men rode at a long, steady trot, following the wagon road from Cottonwood to Twin Buttes. And the mud showed the fresh tracks made by the posse. Cato Munday's buggy tracks were there with the tracks of shod saddle horses. Now and then an empty whiskey flask told that the posse were tanking up as they rode.

Lant was grim-lipped now. He had gotten Jerkline into this mess, though it had actually been the freighter's idea that Lant use him and his freight outfit for a getaway after he held up the Owl. Cato Munday was about to confiscate the freight outfit for debt. The bearded freighter hated the gambler's guts. But just the same, Lant figured he was to blame for getting Jerkline mixed up in this trouble. Even as Chet had gotten that little ink-stained Waldo Leandro Smith into it when he printed his accusations against Elias, McConnico, Jepson and Cato Munday.

Jerkline's freight outfit should be camped on White Horse Creek. The rain had made it heavy going for the loaded freight wagons. There was a wide strip of gumbo flat that would bog a jack snipe in bad weather. Muddy as it was, it would take all day for the freight outfit to cross that strip. There were the deeply rutted tracks. Trenches where Jerkline had had to dig out. Huge clots of gumbo mud along either side of the road where the freighter and his swamper had worked with shovels to knock and scrape the balled mud from between the wagon spokes. Those tracks told the tedious tale of the freighter's heavy progress. Even as the sound of shooting in the distance told a grimmer, more dangerous story.

"That's them. Shootin' up Jerkline's outfit!" Lant's voice cracked like a whip. "Let's git at 'em!"

Ten minutes later they pulled up at the crest of a little rise that looked down on White Horse Creek. And not more than a hundred yards below, a tense little drama was being enacted.

A bunch of Box E and Jepson J cowpunchers surrounded the freight outfit. Their guns in their hands, they were bunched up, holding

their fire. And sitting on one horse, his hands tied behind his back, a rope around his neck, the length of rope thrown over the low-hanging limb of a cottonwood, was the drab little figure of Waldo Leandro Smith.

Sprawled on the ground, in mud that was stained red with his blood, Jerkline Jones lay where he had fallen when he had been clubbed down with gun barrels.

Crouched in the shadow of the high-boxed, tarpaulin-covered powder wagon was little Two Dog Moore, his two sheep dogs beside him. The little swamper's voice was brittle with stark fear and a desperate, terrible courage. Two Dog, mortally afraid of powder since he had been crippled years ago when he was mining, by a premature blast.

"This wagon's loaded with powder," he warned in his high-pitched voice. "Enough powder to blow us all to kingdom come! I got a stick of it in my hand, the cap fixed and the fuse cut short. Turn Waldo loose and ride away from here or, so help me, I'll let you dirty scuts have it! You've run off our horses. Busted them iv'ry rings and the bells. If you've killed Jerkline you killed the only friend I got and I've nothin' more to live fer. Turn Waldo loose or we'll all git blowed to hell together. Shoot at this wagon and it'll blow us into little hunks! I'm not foolin'!"

Lant sucked in his breath and motioned his men back. Two Dog Moore's high-pitched voice was cracking, shrill with tension.

"Turn him loose, men. That locoed, sheep-herdin' swamper ain't foolin'!" That was Lou Lupton's whiskey voice now, hoarse with sudden fear.

The rope was yanked from Waldo Smith's neck and his arms were freed. He was yanked from the saddle and the owner of the horse forked it.

"Let's git gone!" rasped Lou Lupton. The burly stock inspector and his whiskey-filled but fear-sobered posse rode off at a lope.

Waldo Smith got up out of the muck. Mud plastered his clothes and there was a smear of blood on his gray face.

Two Dog Moore stumbled from the shadow of the powder wagon. He knelt beside the slowly stirring form of Jerkline Jones. Sobs racked the little swamper and he cussed to the accompaniment of his two whimpering sheep dogs.

"You got more guts than Custer's cavalry and the Texans at the Alamo!" roared Jerkline's leather-lunged voice. "You damned little son of a gun! You Two Dog!"

The lanky freighter was staggering to his feet, wiping mud and blood from his bearded face.

"Here we go, cowhands!" called Lant.

Lant and his Pool cowpunchers charged past the freight outfit at a run. Their saddle guns were spitting streaks of flame as they took after Lou Lupton's men.

The stock inspector had split his big posse, picking only a handful of

close-mouthed Box E renegades for his lynching party. The Pool men outnumbered them and Lou Lupton was not the breed of leader to hold his men together against two-to-one odds. The big stock inspector was, in fact, leading his men in full flight. None of them had quite recovered from that powder scare and the fighting whiskey had soured in their yellow bellies. There was no fight left in them.

Lant and his Pool men gave up the chase and rode back to the freight outfit.

By lantern light the inside of the freighter caboose was a shambles. The little hand-printing press was smashed. Everything inside was wrecked.

Two Dog Moore, his pair of sheep dogs at his heels, was looking over the harness that had been yanked from under tarp covering and trampled in the mud. The red, white and blue ivory rings were broken and the precious bells had been thrown in the heavy mud. Tears wet the little swamper's whiskered cheeks as he gathered his scattered, mud-caked bells and broken rings.

Waldo Leandro Smith, bruised, battered and mud-stained, managed a faint smile. His eyes were bright-blue sparks.

"The big printing press is hidden in the powder wagon. Intact. It shall record in burning words, gentlemen, the blackguard details of this night's foul deeds." He fingered his rope-burned neck and took the bottle Jerkline held toward him.

Jerkline had taken a terrific beating, but he had dealt out his share of punishment before he was clubbed into submission.

"That Two Dog Moore!" he roared. "So damned scairt of powder that he hauls his tarp an' soogans half a mile down the crick to bed down. He snuck back when he heard the ruckus. Hid in behind that powder wagon and made a dynamite stand! By hell, I'll give him money to buy all the red, white and blue rings they got in the harness shop an' all the bells he kin find. That Two Dog Moore has more guts than all of us put together! Drink hearty, cowhands. When that's gone we'll shrink more out o' the big barrel."

He took a lantern and led them to the big cottonwood tree. Tacked to its trunk was the legal notice informing the public that the freight outfit of Jerkline Jones was to be sold here at the crossing on White Horse Creek at public auction. At midnight on this date.

"Cato Munday," said Jerkline, "come along in his top buggy. Elias and Jepson ahorseback. They stopped here. Then Lou Lupton and his men rode up. And Lou tacks that notice to the tree. He acts as public auctioneer. Sells my freight outfit, horses, wagons, harness, lock, stock and barrel, to the only bidder, Cato Munday, for the debt that tinhorn refused to let me

pay off last week when you gimme the money, Lant. Like I told you.

"Munday drives off in his yaller-wheeled top buggy. Elias and Jepson go along, ridin' on each side of his top buggy, leavin' that big stock inspector Lou Lupton and his tough hands here. And that tinhorn and his two pardners is hardly out o' sight before that big likker-pickled stock inspector says fer me to trot out Waldo Leandro Smith. And his men shoot guns into the air and the ruckus is on. They whipped me over the head with their gun barrels while I was workin' the best I could with a wagon spoke. They knocked me out.

"When I come alive I see they got Waldo fixed for stringin' up to the tree limb. And then Two Dog Moore deals hisself. And Two Dog holds aces. Drink the health of that li'l ol' son of a gun!"

Lant and his men rounded up Jerkline's horses. And Jerkline Jones, freighter, with a grin widening on his battered, bearded face, yanked the canvas wagon sheet off the loaded powder wagon. Refusing any help, he began dumping case after case of dynamite into Wild Horse Creek where it flowed fifteen and twenty feet deep between clay banks.

"We've hauled our last box of powder, Two Dog," he bellowed, "and you kin take ol' Jerkline's word fer it."

While little Two Dog Moore shuddered, and Lant and the Pool men winced inside, Jerkline tossed cases of dynamite into the creek. Sweating, heaving, the bearded giant handled that high explosive as though he were tossing so many sacks of flour into the black water.

Little Waldo Leandro Smith was cleaning the muddy bells in the creek. He puffed his meerschaum pipe, smiling, unperturbed by the reckless handling of the dangerous explosive. As unafraid as he had been when he sat a horse with a hangman's rope around his neck, telling Lou Lupton that he was willing to die a martyr in such a worthy cause, that murder will out and the law would hang his lynchers.

Finally the last case of dynamite was soaking creek water, the last can of black powder opened, its contents poured into the creek. And there was only Waldo Leandro Smith's large printing press, tarp-covered there in the powder wagon.

By that time Lant and his Pool cowpunchers had rounded up and brought in the scattered freight horses.

They were standing around drinking black coffee when a lone rider showed up coming along the road from the mining camp of Twin Buttes.

Lant swung into his saddle and rode out to meet the rider, his hand on his gun. When the man rode within hailing distance, Lant Kilbourn's hand came away from his six-shooter. There was no mistaking that rider. Only one man in the whole wide world could sit a horse like young Chet Kilbourn.

VII

A stranger could have told at a glance that Lant and Chet Kilbourn were brothers. They had the same short nose, longish upper lip and square jaw; the same wiry black hair and clear gray eyes. Chet was just a younger, slimmer, slightly taller edition of the Kilbourn stock.

They grinned at each other and gripped hands. To any onlooker the meeting would have seemed casual.

"Long time no see you, button. You don't look so bad for a convict. Where's that horsehair bridle you was goin' to send?"

"I see you're ridin' that brown geldin' I taken the rough off, Grandmaw. Acts like he handles good. Keep on holdin' up gamblin' houses and you'll git a chance to make your own horsehair bridle at Deer Lodge. I give the only one I made to my best girl. Hell of an engagement present to send her. A prison-made horsehair bridle."

Chet's wide grin flattened and the laughter went out of his eyes. Bitterness had crept into his voice.

"How many Pool men you got that won't quit in a tight, Lant?"

"Just what you see yonder. Mebbe a dozen. What you bin up to now, Chet?"

"I taken a copy of Waldo's newspaper to big Mike McConnico. We've shore got those wolves snappin' at one another's throats."

"Lou Lupton had a rope around Waldo Leandro Smith's neck. Was there enough proof in that sack of stuff to back what that little ink-stained, likker-lovin' rabbit printed in his paper?"

Chet grinned and shook his head. "A gambler like Cato Munday is too smart to have anything incriminatin' layin' around. Your holdup didn't net us much, Lant."

"Then what—"

"But while that poker session was goin' on," explained Chet, "I rode a long, hard circle. I got into Mike McConnico's safe. Then paid a night visit to Jepson's ranch. Went through Anse Jepson's papers. And before daybreak I'd come and gone at the Elias home ranch."

"You shore got around. But what did you find?"

"Not much," admitted Chet. "But we've got 'em all suspicious of one another. None of 'em knows what the others had in the way of papers that might send 'em all to the pen. They're gatherin' right now to have a big powwow. But that medicine talk will only make 'em more suspicious of one another. They're all guilty as hell. And if you'll read that copy of the Twin Buttes *Tribune* with a careful eye, you'll see how Waldo has worded things so that each of those hombres is bein' made the goat by the other three. They hate one another. Distrust each other. That made it easy for Waldo to hamstring 'em. And don't judge that little feller too quick, Lant. Waldo Leandro Smith don't pack a gun or mix into fist fights. But he's got guts. And likker just makes that brain of his

work faster. That printin' press is the only weapon Waldo needs. He's waited a long time and he's here to fight."

"You talk like you knowed him before, Chet."

"He was doin' twenty-five years at Deer Lodge when he got pardoned out. Librarian there. And he got out a little prison paper that's worth readin'. You see, Mike McConnico framed Waldo Smith into the pen to save his own tough hide. Fake minin' stock. Waldo had a little printin' establishment at Helena. Published a little monthly magazine. He owned a printin' and engravin' machine that he invented. High-class stuff. Like he'd take a Charlie Russell paintin' and bring out every color and little detail in his print.

"So Mike McConnico had Waldo Smith print his mining-stock certificates. Fancy-lookin' with a gold miner workin' a crick with his pan and shovel and pick. Shore handsome. He paid the printin' bill with minin' stock. Sold Waldo more stock. Took Waldo into the company. Made him vice president and treasurer at one of those secret meetings where only McConnico and his crooked shyster lawyer were present and the other stockholders voted by proxy. The slickest, trickiest kind of work.

"Cato Munday was in on it, too. And when the law bore down, Mike McConnico and Munday stepped out from under and left little Waldo Leandro Smith bearin' the load.

"Waldo Smith loved his printin' outfit. His little magazine with its handsome pictures was his pet pony. He had no business head. He was almighty bewildered when he found himself charged with grand larceny and sent to Deer Lodge. It broke him. His wife died. His daughter went to working teachin' school. And there in the pen, Waldo Leandro Smith got his bearings. When he found out I was from this part of Montana, we kind o' made war medicine. Waldo's daughter got a pardon out o' the governor. I saddled a horse and rode off. Between us we aimed to smoke McConnico and Munday, Elias and Jepson out of their wolf hole into the open. Now let's git that Pool outfit of yours in a fightin' humor. And we'll go on a wolf hunt."

They rode on down to the freight outfit. Chet Kilbourn tossed Waldo Smith a bulky package.

"There's your mining stock, Waldo," he said. "All of it. Assay reports. Monthly, quarterly and yearly reports of the Twin Buttes Mining Co. The mining stock that was once declared plumb worthless. Now it's one of the richest gold mines in Montana. They've taken a million out of it since you went to the pen. The law will hand you that back on a gold platter. Two Dog Moore and Jerkline Jones know the property. They discovered it. McConnico flimflammed 'em out of it. Proceeds from that mine kept Elias and Jepson from goin' broke

when the hard winter cleaned 'em out. They were all in on the big steal. You're a bloated millionaire now, Waldo. You might git generous-hearted and cut Two Dog and Jerkline in on a few of them gold-edged shares. By the way, Rosemary sent her love and said for you to take a little quinine along with your likker, this dampish weather."

Lant winced inside. Rosemary Smith was the little tawny-haired, brown-eyed schoolmarm at Twin Buttes. The girl Lant had hoped to marry.

"Rosemary is Waldo's daughter," Chet answered the question in Lant's eyes. "She got my horsehair bridle. Now let's git started on that wolf hunt."

Jerkline and Two Dog were uncoupling the lead wagon that had been loaded with powder. They were loading the powder wagon with grub and some whiskey and coupling on the caboose. The other wagons would be left here. He was dropping trail, Jerkline swore, for the first time in his life. Headed for the Kilbourn ranch till the war was over.

Then Lant and Chet Kilbourn and the Pool cowpunchers rode off into the night on what Chet called the big wolf hunt.

They had been gone an hour or more when Sheriff Puck Powers and the older Pool men rode up to the deserted loaded freight wagons that were bogged all the way to the hubs in the muddy road.

VIII

Lant and Chet Kilbourn savvied each other. They looked alike. Their voices sounded alike at times. And while they went at things differently, their main ideas teamed up fairly well. And though neither of them would ever admit it, each admired in the other the traits that were so widely different and sometimes antagonistic.

Lant, older, steadier-going, liked to get things planned out, make certain that he was absolutely right, then go ahead and let nothing this side of hell stop him. Chet called him Ol' Grandmaw. Lant Kilbourn was the best man with a beef herd in that part of the country. Handling a big herd of beef steers is a job that takes savvy if you want to keep tallow on your steers.

Lant walked-grazed a beef herd. And when he worked a herd he cut his cattle out so easily and with such little effort that they said of him he could cut cattle all day without changing horses or sweating the cow horse he forked. That was an exaggerated cow-country way of saying that Lant Kilbourn was a cowman and a top hand.

Chet, on the other hand, hated beef work. Day herd was punishment. The temptation to throw lazy loops at the heels of those big steers was just too much. They said of Chet that he always had a loop cocked. If there came up the ghost of the slightest excuse to rope anything, Chet was swinging that loop of his. And it was a loop that

rarely missed. And he never rode a gentle horse. Chet Kilbourn was a bronc rider and loved it. He bought every outlawed horse he could find and took the buck out of them. Absolutely without fear of a horse, when he was thrown he dusted himself off and tried again. He kept on trying until he had his bronc ridden, and he did it without fighting the horse, without once losing his temper or his nerve. And before long he would be riding that bronc with a loose rein, roping at little bunches of sagebrush or greasewood, whispering or humming, talking a lot of nonsense to the green bronc until that horse quit spooking and fighting its head and got used to whatever Chet was doing in the way of roping or twisting sideways in his saddle to untie his slicker and put it on. And when Chet Kilbourn finished with a bronc in his rough string, a clumsy green hand could ride the horse.

Chet turned over his rough string of broncs only after they were rope-broke, slicker-broke, limber-necked cow horses and fit to put in any top hand's string. He never broke a bronc's spirit.

"Saddle 'em on a cold mornin' and they'll have a hump in their backs," Chet would say. "If you can't set 'em a few crow-hoppin' jumps you'd better ride the bed wagon or git a sheepherdin' job."

Chet Kilbourn would saddle a bronc and swing up in the saddle without untracking the horse to see if there was any buck in him, while Lant or any other cowpuncher would never fork a horse that was just saddled unless he'd led him a few steps to "see what he'd do. What he had in mind."

"Waldo," Chet said as he and Lant rode at the head of the bunch of cowpunchers, "has those wolves smoked out. They're gathered now at the Hog Ranch for their war talk. They've got Lou Lupton and a bunch of tough hands with 'em. Before daybreak we kin ride down on 'em and take the fight to 'em. Cut 'em down, Lant."

"We're in Montana," Lant replied, "and Puck Powers is the law. I wish he was along."

"Bill Elias," said Chet, "has been mixed up in cattle wars before. And Anse Jepson quit Wyoming, between sundown and dark, fetchin' Lou Lupton with him when he came. Mike McConnico was mixed up in trouble in Nevada and the Coeur d'Alene mining country with a bunch of hard-rock dynamiters. Cato Munday has a snake trail that's blood-spattered. I found out a lot at Deer Lodge prison, pardner. And the only way to whip that wolf pack is to kill 'em off. You ain't slowin' up on me, Grandmaw?" Chet's grin took the sting out of his words.

Lant shook his head and grinned back. "No, button, I ain't slowin' up. But that daddy of ours was Sheriff Jake Kilbourn and he believed in the law. I'd sure hate to have Jake Kilbourn lying restless in his grave, Chet."

"Jake Kilbourn got shot in the back," said Chet.

"I'm not forgettin' that, Chet. I'd like to be plumb certain you're right about this wolf hunt."

"You've never stood trial on a framed-up cattle thief charge!" Chet's voice was bitter. "You've never had your clothes taken away and bin handed a number instead of a name and a prison suit and a convict haircut and a prison picture taken to file away in the records. You've never had a price put on your scalp. Never. I broke prison to come back here, feller. And I didn't come back here to play mumbly-peg!"

Chet would have ridden away alone in a hotheaded, lone-handed rush if Lant had not stopped him.

"We're brothers, Chet. I'm ridin' with you. Don't ride your horse down before we git there. You certain they're at the Hog Ranch?"

The deadly quietness of Lant's voice pulled Chet up short. Made him feel young and off-balance and ashamed of his hot outburst.

"We wear the same kind of spurs, Lant," he said, grinning again, "but we use 'em different. Yeah, they're gatherin' at the Hog Ranch. I spotted 'em as I rode past there. You're ramroddin' this layout, pardner, and you'll git the job done right. But it's my notion that we'd better take the fight right to 'em before they git organized strong. Right now those four wolves are barin' their teeth at one another, suspicious and ready to snap. Cato Munday is their pack leader and they don't know what he lost to you out o' that safe. They got that tinhorn sport worried. It'll be to our advantage to move in on 'em before they talk things over and patch up their differences."

Lant nodded. Chet had two canvas sacks, their contents bulky, tied on his saddle. One was the sack that held the loot from the Owl safe. The other, Chet said, was what he'd taken from McConnico, Elias and Jepson.

"I kept out a few items," Chet grinned, "like that minin' stock I handed over to Waldo. The notes, mortgages, I O U's and such that Cato Munday held against us, I made into a bonfire. But the money and such truck is in these sacks. Rosemary is keepin' a few incriminatin' papers hid out so, in case we lose, she'll have something to fight 'em with. She's a game gal. She's bin workin' all this time to git the goods on Mike McConnico. That's why she taken that schoolmarm job. They never connected her with Waldo Smith. Rosemary was just another Miss Smith."

Lant said nothing. Chet was more Rosemary's kind. Chet had a way with girls. They fell for his bronc-riding swagger.

Lant remembered that just before Chet had been yanked up on that cattle-rustling charge, Puck Powers' red-headed daughter, Toby, had been the girl Chet was riding fifty miles to see. He had given Toby Powers a pinto pony and a silver-mounted bridle he had won

as a bronc-riding prize at some rodeo.

Lant had none of his younger brother's swagger and grin and line of joshing talk. He was not a fancy dresser like Chet. Chet was the best dancer around this part of the cow country. Lant always felt a little awkward and clumsy and shy around women. His face got red and he sweated a lot at dances and he couldn't learn any fancy stepping.

o

In his slower, steady-going, inarticulate way, he had paid court to Rosemary Smith at Twin Buttes. She hadn't talked much about Chet, although she had danced a few times with him before he got sent to the pen. But this business of her being engaged to marry Chet was a gut shot to Lant. Lant hadn't gotten up the courage to ask Rosemary to be his wife. And anyhow things had been too unsettled to think about asking a girl to marry him. Lant had some grim and dangerous chores to tend to. If and when he got them done, he'd figured, that would be time enough to think about a wife.

But that Chet! An escaped convict, a price on his head, and the best he could offer in the way of a gift a prison-made horsehair bridle, asking Rosemary Smith to be his wife. And that little golden-haired, dark-eyed, quiet-mannered schoolmarm had taken Chet up on it. Or so Chet was leading him to believe. It didn't seem fair to the girl. Not quite straight and honorable.

"Pull your head up, Grandmaw," grinned Chet. "Yonder's the Hog Ranch lights."

IX

There were no hogs, never had been any hogs, at the Hog Ranch. Jerkline claimed the stage station got its name from the slovenly condition of the place and the grub put out to paying passengers on the stagecoach and other travelers who stopped there for a meal. The stock tender was usually a married man. He tended the stage stock and tended bar at the little log saloon. More than often he would be a squaw man and his wife would cook and serve meals. The grub would be as bad as the rotgut whiskey. Hog slop. Hence the name Hog Ranch had been tagged on it.

Cato Munday and Mike McConnico owned the stage line and had the contract for hauling the mail between Cottonwood and Twin Buttes. They now owned the Hog Ranch. A squaw man and his Cree wife ran the place. The Cree squaw was a better than average cook. The man was close-mouthed, surly, watchful and suspicious. When Cato Munday or McConnico showed up with Elias and Jepson for a poker session or a secret meeting, the squaw man would take his Cree woman and move down the creek a mile or two to a cabin there, leaving the place to his employers and their friends. They'd be gone tonight.

There was a big log barn and pole corral, a horse pasture that straddled the creek and hay meadow, a small log saloon with a pine-board bar, a long wagon and machine shed, a blacksmith shop and a couple of small log cabins where Cato Munday, Mike McConnico, Elias or Jepson sometimes stayed overnight. The big log house boasted a kitchen, a dining room, and a big sitting room with a large round-bellied stove set in a sand box that gave warmth to passengers and stage driver, freighters, travelers of all kinds, in bad weather. Cato Munday sometimes banked a poker game in the log house when some cow outfit was camped near the Hog Ranch.

The Hog Ranch had always maintained a tough reputation. There were slab-marked graves on the hill to prove it. And more than one man had been killed there and his grave never found. Where the stage and freight road crossed Upper White Horse at the Hog Ranch there was a sandy and gravel crossing. But below the horse pasture the far-between crossings were black and boggy. And the bog holes were said to be burying places for bigger game than the hides of "slow elk," which was the cow country name for stolen beef.

Cato Munday and Mike McConnico had done nothing to lift the tough reputation there at the Hog Ranch. Lou Lupton used the place for his headquarters. His notched six-shooter had helped enlarge the Hog Ranch boothill.

Cased beer was sold in the log saloon. Beer and two grades of barrel whiskey. The good whiskey was for Cato Munday and Mike McConnico, Bill Elias and Anse Jepson. The rotgut forty-rod whiskey was sold by the jug or bottle or served in the drinks across the bar to all other customers who had the cash or credit on the books.

Cato Munday, Mike McConnico, Bill Elias and Anse Jepson sat around the big green cloth-covered poker table in the main house. The doors were shut and the blinds pulled. They had a jug of whiskey and a pitcher of water and glasses. But tonight there were no stacks of poker chips or decks of cards..

Mike McConnico, a big, two-hundred-pound man in a Mackinaw shirt and corduroy pants shoved into laced hunting boots, his jowled face covered with a two days' growth of reddish-gray whiskers, his hard green eyes bloodshot and ugly, spat a stream of tobacco juice at the sand box and spread a folded copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's Twin Buttes *Tribune* on the green-covered round table. His big hands, the backs furred with tufts of red hair, were a little unsteady. His heavy voice filled the room.

"There it is, gents. That sheep-brained governor has pardoned that little half-pint ink-slinger. The safe at the mine was gutted. I'm told that the Owl safe was cleaned out and that a night rider paid the same kind of a visit to Elias and Jepson. This damned newspaper, backed by proof, kin send us all over the road.

Why wasn't Waldo Smith cut down before he got this thing spread all over the country? Why hasn't somebody cut down Lant Kilbourn? And Chet Kilbourn ridin' all over the country, bold and free as the breeze! What in hell has Lou Lupton been doin' to earn his free drinks? Somethin' almighty crooked and dirty is goin' on. I'm callin' for a showdown!"

"It looks to me"—Anse Jepson's yellow buck teeth bared in a snarl—"like the fat's in the fire. What the hell was in that safe of yourn, Cato?"

Elias scowled blackly and took a drink. His eyes watched Cato Munday and Mike McConnico.

"Mike's bellerin'," Elias said sharply, "won't git him nowhere. Neither will that poker silence of yourn, Cato. Anse Jepson and I had nothin' to do with sendin' this Waldo Leandro Smith to the pen. We're clean."

"Lant and Chet Kilbourn wouldn't see eye to eye with you there, Elias," drawled Munday. "And don't forget that the Twin Buttes Mine kept you and Anse Jepson from goin' to the wall after the hard winter. And before any of you get drunk, get this straight. We'd better hang together. Or, as the old saying has it, we'll hang separately. And speaking of hanging, we'd better take it easy till Lou Lupton and his boys show up. Waldo Leandro Smith should be out of circulation by now."

Elias looked at his big silver watch again. His black scowl thickened.

"Lou Lupton," he said, "is overdue."

"He might have cut Chet Kilbourn's sign," suggested Anse Jepson.

The lanky sheepman walked to the door, opened it and stood there for a long moment, staring out into the night. Then he shut the door and walked back to the table. He poured himself a stiff drink.

"There's only some of our men Lou sent on before he tackled Jerkline," Anse Jepson said, his tone nasal, "tankin' up on Hog Ranch panther juice in the saloon. Lou Lupton better git that job done right."

"Lou," said Cato Munday, "settled Simms. He'll take care of Waldo Smith."

"Simms!" Mike McConnico growled. "Why Simms?"

"Simms was getting itchy-palmed," explained the gambler. "Blackmail in his one-tracked mind. And he was drunk and nasty because Chet Kilbourn had slapped him around. When I wouldn't give him any more free booze or pay him money for a cattle-train job he bungled, he sat down at his telegraph key with a copy of Waldo Leandro Smith's little sheet. He was sending it out over the wire when Lou shot him in the back. I tried to cover Lou by getting out a bench warrant for Lant Kilbourn. But our honest Sheriff Puck Powers tore up the warrant. Puck will have to be taken care of. What the devil is keeping Lou? If he's gotten drunk on the job, he's

through. Time counts. Lant and Chet Kilbourn have to be cut down. Raise the bounty on Chet's hide. Put a secret bounty on Lant's scalp. Lou Lupton ain't the only bounty hunter who can shoot a gun. Make the price high enough, gents, and I might be tempted to do a little hunting myself."

"Why not?"

The voice came from the dining room. It was dark in there. They had not heard the outside kitchen door open and close cautiously, the tiptoed footsteps and faint jingle of spurs as someone crossed the kitchen into the dining room, blowing out the low-turned lamps and opening the door from the dining room into the front room that was lighted by a big lamp that swung in a brass mounting from the ridge log.

Chet Kilbourn stood back in the shadow, a six-shooter in one hand, a partly filled canvas sack in the other.

"Take it easy!" Chet's voice was hard, reckless, dangerous. "Take it easy or I'll begin shootin'. And I won't miss." He raised his voice. "All right, Lant!"

The front door opened, let Lant Kilbourn in, and closed behind him. Lant had a six-shooter in one hand, a partly filled canvas sack in the other.

Lant and Chet tossed the partly filled sacks into the room and onto the big round-topped, green-covered poker table.

"We're through with your stuff, gents," said Lant. "You'll find nothin' missin' that rightfully belongs to any of you. Your money is all there, Cato. And just for the hell of it, tinhorn, take a good look at my spurs. Then at Chet's. The only real way of identifyin' the man in the slicker who gutted the Owl safe is a pair of silver-mounted spurs with silver conchos marked with the K brand. You couldn't swear if it was Chet or Lant Kilbourn who held you up. You're smart enough to know what a laugh that would git you in court. Sit down, gents, or we'll knock you down with some .45 slugs in your yellow guts!"

They had all quit their chairs. Now they sat down again under the deadly steady menace of the two Kilbourn six-shooters.

"You might have a long wait for Lou Lupton," said Lant. "He fell down on the job. Two Dog Moore run him and his tough hands off with a stick of powder. Waldo Smith didn't hang. But the little feller will hang Lou Lupton and the rest of you gents before he's through. Because each one of you has donated enough to the jackpot to anyhow send you to Deer Lodge. You four men murdered Sheriff Jake Kilbourn. Chet and I don't need any more proof than we've got. Lou Lupton's notched gun did the bushwhacking. But you four men hired him to do the job. And I've bin arguin' with Chet along the way.

"I was in favor of lettin' Puck Powers arrest you. Waldo Smith's papers will convict you. But a hangin' jury is hard to find. There's always some chicken-hearted thing on the jury that don't favor hangin'.

So Chet has just about argued me over to his way of thinkin'. A year in the pen ain't improved Chet's disposition any to'rds you gents. It's your deal, Chet. Git it out o' your system." Lant's grin was flat-lipped, merciless, his eyes as hard as slits of gray steel.

"I'm wastin' my first bullet," said Chet Kilbourn, "to put out that lamp. The other lead in Lant's gun and mine has your names on the bullets. We're givin' you two-to-one odds and an even break for your guns. You all set, Lant?"

The grin on Chet's face was reckless and his eyes caught and reflected the lamp light like shining steel.

These were the two Kilbourn brothers. Sons of the murdered Sheriff Jake Kilbourn. The four men watching them knew that they would get no mercy.

In that long moment they tensed, their hands edging toward their guns. The silence was broken only by the ticking of a clock in the kitchen.

Then Lant Kilbourn's flat-toned voice. "All set, button. Luck."

"Luck, Grandmaw."

Chet's gun never lifted from above the slanted line of his belt. His shot smashed the swinging lamp and he and Lant dropped to a low crouch, their guns spewing streaks of flame. The big table was upset with a heavy crash. Four guns in the center of the room spat fire. The din in the room was deafening. No quarter asked, none given. This was a fight to the death. Played for keeps.

Anse Jepson's nasal voice ripped through the gunfire in a rasping, agonized scream. Then it choked into silence. Mike McConnico's bellowing, roaring cursing sloughed off into a cough and blood choked the cough into an ugly death rattle that sounded odd in the deafening roar of guns.

Elias rushed the back door and Chet's reckless laugh filtered through the din as he shot Elias down. Then Chet's laughter checked suddenly in a quick gasp as if he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

Lant had been jerked around and onto his knees when a .45 slug tore through his shoulder. Then he felt a thudding, burning rip in his thigh. He had shot three times. He was saving those other three bullets. His eardrums seemed shattered, deafened by the heavy gunfire inside the log walls. His head seemed clogged and the acrid powder smoke was choking him. He felt no pain, but he knew that he had been hit twice and was badly wounded. His brain was as thick as the blackness that was choked with powder smoke and vibrating with gun echoes. He tried to think. Count. Three shots. One had hit Jepson. The other, his first shot, should have gotten the gambler.

But just as Chet's bullet had smashed the lamp, plunging the room into sudden darkness, Cato Munday had thrown himself in behind McConnico as big Mike upset the table. And so Lant had a hunch his shot had missed. That it had been the gambler's bullet that had hit him in the shoulder. And somewhere inside

this shambles of death Cato Munday was moving cautiously, silently, toward that front door.

The shooting stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Out of that powder-smoked-filled blackness Chet's voice sounded hoarse, strained.

"Lant!"

"Lay low, button!"

"So long . . . Lant . . . Grandmaw. Luck—"

Lant's heart shriveled as he heard Chet's voice fade into a whisper.

Off to his left Lant heard a cautious movement. That would be Cato Munday. The gambler had heard Chet, heard his voice fade into a thin whisper. The tinhorn would be going out the back way now that Chet was no longer there with a gun in his hand to block Munday's passage.

Lant staggered to his feet. He stumbled and fell over a dead man. A gun spat flame and the bullet whined past his head. Lurching to his feet, Lant charged. A gun exploded almost in his face. Burning powder stung his face, half-blinded him. He stumbled like a drunken man, and when his gun barrel shoved against something yielding he pulled the trigger. Cato Munday's hoarse cry of agony struck Lant in the face. He kept going. Stumbled into the gambler. And as they crashed to the floor, Lant, his left arm dangling uselessly, his gun probing in the dark, felt his gun hand touch the gambler's face. He poked with the gun again. Quickly. Blindly. Its muzzle shoved against something. As Cato Munday screamed, Lant pulled the trigger. The gun roared in his ears. There was no longer a scream. Only bullet-torn flesh and bone where the scream had come from.

Like a man in a nightmare, Lant heard shooting outside. Then both the front and back doors were smashed open. Lant's gun was empty. He could not reload because his left hand dangled uselessly from a bullet-smashed shoulder. In the darkness he counted the shots he had fired. Empty? Not quite. One bullet, one cartridge left . . . for Lou Lupton. Play possum, play dead till there was a light lit and Lou Lupton bent over him. Then kill that glory-hunting murderer with his last shot. Play possum.

"Strike a light! There's candles somewhere. That's it. Mr. Devil in hell!"

X

Lant Kilbourn felt his senses reeling. He was past the shock stage now and pain was tearing at him and he felt sick. His ears were clogged and whoever owned that voice sounded miles away. Lant lay on his right side, his gun cocked in his hand. He opened his eyes to slits. There was a flickering light in the room, but Lant could not make out the men who were no more than moving shadows in a dull red haze.

Then a man bent over Lant and grabbed him by his wounded shoulder. That would be Lou Lupton. Let him have it. Lant used the last

of his strength to twist his right arm around so he'd be able to pull the trigger.

A quick-moving heavy hand slapped the gun out of his hand as it went off, the recoil throwing the weapon spinning in the air.

Then Lant heard Sheriff Puck Powers' voice. Cussing. "Thought you was dead. You're bloody enough to be dead. Damn near shot me in the belly. Now where in blazes is that doctor?"

Puck was wiping the blood out of Lant's eyes. Lant forced a twisted grin.

"Take a look at Chet. Tell the doc to look at Chet—"

Then Lant's eyes closed and he passed out. And when he woke up again he was bandaged and there was the taste of whiskey in his mouth. He was undressed and in bed between sheets.

"Doctor's orders or not, ma'am, good likker is what'll pull them two Kilbourn boys through."

"Whiskey is a cure-all. I know, sheriff. It's my father's gospel."

Lant got his eyes pried open. He saw Sheriff Puck Powers standing by the bed, a bottle in his hand. And on the other side stood Rosemary Smith, dressed in white.

"Chet?" Lant's voice was no more than a croaking whisper.

"Chet's going to live. Lant, you've got to fight now. You've got to, Lant for us!"

Rosemary's eyes were tear-dimmed and her lips were against his face and her hands were smoothing back his sweat-damp hair.

"You bin runnin' off at the head," Puck Powers told Lant with a grin, "like a damn magpie. Out o' your head. But there was no doubtin' your true meanin'. I'll take a nip of this pain reducer into the other cabin where Chet is frettin' about you. You got what it takes to put you back on your laigs, and it ain't likker. I got Lou Lupton, Lant. Paid off Jake Kilbourn's debt. Take care of Lant, ma'am. And directly, your daddy shows up, I'll sure let you know right off."

Puck was easing out the door with the bottle when Lant's voice halted him.

"Tell me about it, Puck." He hung onto Rosemary's hand. "How it tallies up."

"The Pool cowpunchers backed your play, Lant. They had those fellers in the saloon hollerin' 'uncle' when we showed up. We got slowed up a few minutes when we jumped Lou Lupton and his bunch. We wiped up Lou and his tough hands and come on. Lou, I reckon, was scared to show up here with his bad news. And I had a bench warrant for him. I'd stopped at the railroad station at Cottonwood. The barber takin' Simms' place showed me a copy of the last message Simms clicked out on his telegraph key. He'd sighted Lou with a gun a-comin' at him.

"His last message, on top of the stuff he'd bin sendin' from Waldo Smith's paper, read like this: 'Lou Lupton is coming to kill me. Cato

Munday is the double-crosser that sent him.'

"The Pool outfit lost a man or two. The jail at Cottonwood won't hold but a half dozen. So I give them Box E and Jepson J cowhands a few hours to quit the country. They hightailed it.

"With Cato Munday and Mike McConnico and Elias and Jepson dead, you Pool men kin divide them two big outfits among yourselves," Puck went on. "From the talk outside, the Pool is lettin' you and Chet buy the Box E at the sheriff's sale for about a dollar and a round of drinks. They'll bid in the Jepson J at about the same figure. The Twin Buttes Mine goes to Waldo Leandro Smith and his daughter, though Waldo is cuttin' Jerkline Jones and Two Dog Moore in as pardners. They were talkin' it over when I overtaken 'em along the road. I told 'em to foller me here. They'll be along directly, I reckon. That's about the size of the news—"

Lant told Puck to wait a minute. "You actually ramrodded this whole thing, Puck. If we're dividin' the spoils—"

"Cato Munday," cut in Powers, "beat me to this stage line and mail contract. I had a good saloon business till his Owl started up. I'm takin' over the stage line and Hog Ranch and I'm turnin' the Owl into a high-class saloon. I'm one of those old cowhands whose night-guardin' hours was spent figgerin' how I'd git me a good saloon and settle down. And it looks like I'll be sheriff another term. Now I got to deliver a telegram I've bin holdin' for Chet. It's from the warden at Deer Lodge, telling Chet that his pardon come through the day he pulled out. But the warden wants to know kin he come back to the prison ranch for a week or two and finish takin' the edge off that rough string."

Puck sidled out the door with his bottle. A few minutes later when Rosemary was telling Lant that she'd ridden here alone from Twin Buttes because she was worried about her father, and had arrived in time to hear the last gun-echoes, Lant heard Chet's laugh. It sounded a little on the weak side, but, to Lant, it had lost nothing of its recklessness.

"I'll go back and ride out that rough string for him, Puck. He hasn't got a good bronc handler there. How long will it be, doc, before I kin set a bronc? A month? I'll have to make it sooner than that or I'll have a string of spoiled horses to mess with. I'll go back as soon as I kin git around on crutches. I left a half-finished horsehair bridle. Not one of them gaudy-colored ones like I fetched Lant's best girl for a weddin' present.

"It's natural-colored horsehair, all sorrel mane and tail. It taken a year to collect enough hair the right colors. I had a sample to go by, Puck. Toby gave me a lock of her hair when I went to the pen. And the warden gave me my pick of that string of broncs. There's a chestnut sorrel colt I picked. I'm breakin' that geldin' for Toby. With that

sorrel horse hair bridle, and that way she sets a horse, she'll take first prize when she rides in the rodeo parades and does her fancy ropin'. If it's all right with you, Puck, Toby and I kin git married along with Rosemary and Lant. Sort of a double-barreled weddin'. I kin just about hear those weddin' bells ringin' right now, Puck!"

Lant grinned and shook his head, then pulled Rosemary's face down and kissed her.

"That Chet. I might've known he was hoorawin' me about you. Or was he?"

Rosemary smiled. "Chet told me when he gave me that gaudy horse-hair bridle that he'd prod you into proposing to me one of these days, Grandmaw. Listen, Lant. Those bells!"

Lant had her shift his bed around so that he could see through the open doorway. Even as Chet and Puck Powers were watching. And the Pool men were piling out of the saloon for a look.

In the crimson-streaked sunrise it was a sight to watch and remember. A sixteen-horse jerkline freight team hauling one big boxed freight wagon and a two-wheeled canvas-covered caboose.

Jerkline Jones was sitting his nigh wheeler. Two Dog Moore was on his gentle white pony, his two sheep dogs trotting along beside him as he rode along, popping his blacksnake. Waldo Leandro Smith sat the high seat of the wagon, his meerschaum pipe in his mouth, a bottle in his hand.

There were sixteen horses in that string team that came up out of the sunrise, every chain tug tight. A hundred small bronze bells were chiming, chain harness clanking, wagons rattling. Blacksnakes popping. The leather-lunged voice of Jerkline Jones, freighter, bellowing in the quiet morning:

"Tighten up there! Hell an' Damnation! Beer an' Whiskey! Nip an' Tuck! Take It an' Leave It! Hay Foot an' Straw Foot! Roulette an' Faro! Ace an' Deuce! Broke an' Hungry! Tighten up there, the bunch of you!"

Give them a million, and Jerkline and Two Dog would keep on freighting. Give him a million and little Waldo Leandro Smith would still stick with his printing press, ink-stained, a little tipsy, happy in his chosen work.

There was something about that string team coming up out of the sunrise, bells chiming, that tightened a man's throat and held him a little breathless.

New graves would be found today at sundown at the Hog Ranch boothill. But this was sunrise. And Lant Kilbourn forgot the pain that racked him.

"I'll always hear those bells, Lant." There were tears in Rosemary Smith's eyes. "I'll always remember this sunrise! And the bells of a jerkline freight outfit!"

THE END

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By Bennett Foster

Those three tough renegades had a safe hide-out until they wore out their welcome with

THE PIPER OF BRIDLEBIT

I

ON the morning of July Fourth, Hamish McDonald was wakened by the tinkling of broken glass in a windowpane and the echoing roar of a shot. Rising hastily from his bed, he slid into his breeches, hauled his shirt down over his head and, with the sleep still lingering in his eyes, made for the broken window. The sash went up with a clatter, and Hamish, glared out at Bridlebit's single dusty street.

Directly opposite him the railroad spread its two tracks. At the corner, by the depot, a little knot of mounted men were congregated. As

Hamish stared, the men on horseback broke their gathering. Streaming down the street, they came, their voices high as they yelled, the morning sun glinting from the big guns they flourished above their wide-brimmed hats. Those guns spouted fire and smoke and lead, and Hamish hastily withdrew from the window.

He was sitting on his bed, surveying the hobnailed sole of one heather boot when Fergus Ferguson came in.

Fergus, younger than Hamish by twenty years, grinned cheerfully. "It's the Fourth of July," he announced. "The boys are celebrating a bit."

"Ye don't say?" Hamish observed, returning his gaze to the hobnailed, steel-plated sole of the boot.

"Our national holiday," Fergus elaborated. "They don't mean any harm."

Hamish grunted and looked at the broken window.

"Get dressed and we'll eat breakfast," Fergus ordered. "I'll explain it to you, Hamish."

Over the breakfast table in the hotel's dining room, Fergus made good his promise. Hamish, stolidly munching the bacon and eggs that had been served him in lieu of porridge, listened to the younger man.

"From the Sassenach, ye say?" he queried, poising fork before his mouth. "They had a war with the Bloody Backs an' they're celebratin' it?"

"It all happened a long time ago," explained Fergus. "But every year on the fourth of July this country celebrates its independence."

"An' no' a bad idee," Hamish agreed, stowing away the eggs. "I'll be havin' a wee bit o' look at the sheep noo. They'll mebbe be needin' somethin'." He rose, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand upon which the hair was still red and, setting his balmoral carefully atop his graying hair, strode away.

In the stockyards close by the railroad tracks, Hamish surveyed thirty black-faced Cheviot bucks that looked out at him with anxious eyes. From the Linnhe Loch, across the Atlantic, across the Appalachians, up the broad valley of the Missouri, to the sage-covered plains of Wyoming, Hamish McDonald had brought those sheep. Fergus Ferguson had bought them in Moidart, intent to improve the breed of the flocks that ran upon his Wyoming ranch, and at the behest of The McDonald, chief of his clan, Hamish had accompanied the Cheviots to this, their new home.

"It's the war they're celebratin'," Hamish told the black-faced bucks. "A victory over the bloody Sassenach, d'ye ken?"

The bucks' foolish slitted eyes told him nothing, and Hamish climbed down into the pen. "A little water will help ye," he announced. "I'll just give ye some."

He had completed that task when he was appraised of company. A horse stood beside the pen, and from its back a young, brown-faced man surveyed Hamish and his charges.

"Sheep!" the rider exploded.

"Aye," Hamish returned mildly. "Sheep."

The rider pushed his hat back, exposing a thatch of brown hair which he scratched vigorously. "Some folks like 'em," he said.

"Aye," Hamish agreed.

"But I don't," the rider stated flatly.

"Ye wasn't asked," retorted Hamish.

The rider thought that over. "It's the Fourth of July," he announced. "I'd even buy a sheepman a drink on the Fourth of July."

The words "buy" and "drink" penetrated Hamish's consciousness. Instinctively he sensed the antagonism of the man on the horse, and instinctively his own antagonism arose to meet it. Still the rider had mentioned "buy" and "drink." Hamish climbed out of the pen.

"I heard ye," he announced.

"Well, then, Scotty," the rider drawled, "let's go get a drink."

In the saloon across the tracks Hamish savored the whiskey. It was red in color and raw to the throat. There was none of the pleasant, smoky tang of the mountain brew in this fiery liquor. Hamish choked and coughed, and his companion and the other cowpunchers gathered along the bar, looked inquiringly at him. Hamish had met them all. The brown-haired boy was Curly Welch and the others were Curly's companions, riders for the OYO. They had taken possession of the Bull Head for the day.

Three drinks later, all caution left Hamish. He bumped the bottle down on the bar and made announcement: "Honey! That's what it needs."

"What's that, Scotty?" demanded Curly.

"Honey, d'ye ken?" Hamish answered. "We'll make Athole brose. Where's the honey?"

Honey was sent for. While they waited, Hamish took two more drinks; then, equipped with honey and a big bowl furnished by the bartender, he mixed cautiously and cunningly. All down the bar, men set out their glasses and the brew was poured. The drinks were taken and lips were smacked. Hamish looked fondly at his new friends.

"Make some more," commanded Curly Welch.

At noon Hamish McDonald issued from the Bull Head Saloon. His arm was about the shoulders of Curly, and behind him trailed the other riders of the OYO. Hamish's balmoral sat rakishly atop his gray hair, hair that still showed a tinge of the red that had given the Scot his name. His heather boots struck as resoundingly upon the sidewalk planking as did the high-heeled footgear of his companions. All was warmth and sweetness and light in Hamish McDonald's heart. He must do something for his friends.

"'*Scots wha hae wi Wallace bled—*'" Hamish roared, and, forgetting the intervening lines, concluded with a wild Highland shout.

"You tell 'em, Scotty," praised the brown-haired Curly.

At the hotel, Hamish paused. The

street was lined with horses and with men. The horses, tied, stood drowsing at the hitchrails. The men, celebrating, entered or emerged from saloons. An idea assailed Hamish.

"I'll come back the noo," he announced, and entered the hotel.

Hamish McDonald was a shepherd; also he was a piper of the clan of McDonald. When again he emerged upon the street it was in this second role. In the battered grip and in the well-tied bundle that had accompanied Hamish from Moidart, there had been certain treasured possessions. Now, Glengarry cocked rakishly, kilt swirling about bony, hairy legs, sporran swinging, plaid across his shoulders, Hamish came out to Bridlebit. Under his elbow the bag of his pipes swelled. The chanter was beneath his knowing fingers and the ribbon-decorated drones were cocked skyward. Hamish took a long breath, blew into the bag, and pressed with his elbow. Eyes unseeing, heather boots pounding, he took up his beat upon Bridlebit's plank sidewalk and from drones and chanter issued sounds such as the town had never heard before. Up and down the walk Hamish strode, adding his bit to the celebration of July Fourth, and up into Bridlebit's thin air went the strains of "Cock of the North."

At the hitchrails the dozing horses came to life and reared, pulling back against restraining reins, breaking those leather tethers. Men popped out of saloons and stores like corn from a hot popper. Heedless of all the commotion, Hamish assailed "Cock of the North," adding those adornments and furbelows that had made him a master piper in Moidart. The horses milled in the streets, broke and ran in mad stampede, the clarion call of the chanter and the wail of the drones pursuing them and adding to their fright. Men ducked under the hitchrails, each intent upon securing his own mount, and ever Hamish tramped back and forth, back and forth, struck blind by the beauty of his piping; and of the moment.

Curly Welch came running from the Bull Head toward the sound. From two directions the law descended upon Hamish. Celebration this might be, and much was tolerated; but not this. Bridlebit's fat town marshal and Bridlebit's deputy sheriff came, on foot and in haste, to abate the nuisance. Ian Gordon, the deputy, reached Hamish just as Fergus Ferguson came leaping from the door of the hotel.

"Here," Gordon ordered. "You can't do that in Bridlebit."

Hamish, his muse interrupted in the midst of an embellishment, glared at the man whose hand had seized his chanter.

"He's just piping, Gordon," Ferguson interposed hastily. "He's—"

"Is that all?" Gordon was incredulous. "I thought he was chokin' the danged thing. Whatever it is, he can't do it here."

Hamish's hand had stolen down to the dirk that ever rested in the top of one plaid stocking. At the

name "Gordon" he checked the motion. The Gordons and the McDonalds had always been friendly.

The town marshal came panting up and, seeing that the sheriff's office had the situation in hand, stood by. Fergus put his hand placatingly on Hamish's arm. Out in the street, now that the wail of the pipes had died, men were repossessing and calming their horses.

Hamish sought to assuage matters. "Ye're celebratin' a veectory over the Bloody Backs," he announced. "I was furnishin' a wee bit music for the occasion."

"Music!" Gordon snorted. "You call that noise 'music'? Why, I—"

Fergus Ferguson caught Hamish's arm as the Scot reached again for the dirk. Curly Welch, making peace, interposed his word. "G'wan an' let him play, Ian," Curly pleaded. "G'wan an' play, Scotty. Play 'The Campbells Are Comin'.'"

Here was the supreme insult! Hamish swelled like the bag of his pipes and with one jerk freed his arm from Ferguson's grip. Wildly Ferguson sought for something that would stop the piper.

But one generation removed from Scotland, imbued with the lore of the Highlands due to his recent visit there, Ferguson found the thing he sought. "Hamish!" he warned. "You're a guest. Remember, you're a guest!"

That turned the trick. In the Highlands, even as in the broad reaches of the West, hospitality was inviolate. Hamish checked his motion toward the dirk in his stocking. He drew himself up proudly. "There's no need to remind a McDonald of his dooty," he announced loftily. "E'en amang fools!" With that withering blast he turned and made for the door of the hotel.

Fergus Ferguson wiped beads of sweat from his damp forehead. He looked at Curly Welch and Ian Gordon. Gordon was staring hostilely at the door of the hotel.

"I still think I should've run him in," the deputy snapped. "He stampeded every horse in the street."

"That's the first time I ever seen a full-grown man wear a dress," Curly drawled.

Ferguson placed a firm hand on the arm of either man. "I'll buy a drink," he announced. "I'll buy two drinks."

Across Curly's lips a grin flickered. "I don't know what all this is about," he drawled as he moved toward the Bull Head, "but it must be somethin' powerful to make a Scotchman offer to buy. Come on, Ian, before he changes his mind."

II

On July 5th, cherishing a headache, Fergus Ferguson helped Hamish McDonald take the Cheviot bucks on north. For five days they crossed the wide wasteland, and on the evening of the fifth day they reached their destination—the Ferguson headquarters. There they stopped. The mountains towered in the distance, and all about them stretched the plains. The Basque herders stared curiously at Hamish and his charges.

Ferguson plunged into details of the ranch, inquiring into the events that had transpired during his absence, and Hamish McDonald, left in charge of the bucks, took them out on grass.

At first Hamish was restless and dour as only a Highland Scot can be. The new country, the new food, and the new ways pleased him not at all. Then, as he found the wagon Ferguson assigned him as comfortable a home as a crofter's cot; as the mountains grew familiar and as he settled down into his new routine, Hamish became more contented. He had the sheep, not only the Cheviot bucks, but Ferguson's entire buck herd. He had a home, albeit it rolled on wheels and was made of wood and canvas, and he had a dog, a little sable collie that he promptly dubbed Wallace, and that looked up adoringly into his bewhiskered face. Still, Scotland was far away and the pangs of homesickness often welled up in Hamish. Sternly he repressed them. The McDonald had bidden him come with the bucks, and he had come.

Sometimes, during the long summer evenings when the bucks were bedded, Hamish sat outside his wagon with Wallace coiled at his feet, and in his rasping voice, the words thick Gaelic, sang the tunes of the Highlands. "*Ghruagach Dhonn,*" he sang, dreaming of the brown-haired maiden as he sang it; and "*Soraidh Slan le Fionnairidh,*" the mournful "Farewell to Fiunary." Sometimes when the mood was upon him, he hauled out the pipes, and then the drones murmured and the chanter shrilled in the still Wyoming night. At first the tunes were sad, but as the weeks went by and became months, as Ferguson—who was his own camp tender—moved the wagon from place to place, as the mountains became more friendly, and the whole world not so drear, Hamish McDonald played jigs and reels and strathspeys.

But the songs and the pipes would not remove the loneliness. This was an outland. This was not home. And ever in Hamish McDonald's mind, the insult lingered. These foreigners had called the music of the pipes noise. They had belittled him. And, insult piled on insult, they had suggested that he, Hamish, of the clan McDonald, play the tune of the hated Campbells.

In October Fergus Ferguson came with a team and moved Hamish's camp close to the railroad. Across the tracks spread the cow range of the **OYO,** and Fergus warned Hamish that for no reason must the bucks encroach upon that grass. Cowman and sheepman dwelt together in tranquillity upon the Bridlebit range, but the sheepman must keep his place—as must also the cowman—to preserve that peace.

With the wagon moved and freshly supplied, Ferguson departed and once more Hamish was alone with his sheep, his dog and his pipes. But no longer was he lonely. Twice a day he could look down upon the tracks and see passenger trains crawl along the rails. At odd times freight trains huffed and puffed their

way to east or west. So clear was the air, so still and thin, that Hamish could count the little crawling cars, five miles away, could even hear the faint and eerie echo of the whistle, long moments after the white steam plumed up from the stack. At night there were two more trains, crawling glowworms, bound west into the mining country, or east from it. Somehow the trains diminished Hamish's loneliness and became personal friends that, by their very presence, made life more livable.

On a frosty night in mid-October, Hamish had retired to his wagon and was preparing for bed when Wallace gave warning with a low growl. Two steps took Hamish to the door that the collie was watching so intently, and, opening it, the Scot peered out. From beyond the bedded sheep came the rhythmical sound of horses walking, and Hamish, leaving the door open, stepped out to welcome his visitors.

There were three of the riders; saturnine, bewhiskered men who halted their horses just beyond the lantern light that came streaming through the door, and looked at the shepherd.

"Hello, Scotty," the tallest of the riders greeted.

"Good day to ye," Hamish responded.

Without more ado the men dismounted and came forward. Hamish liked neither their looks nor their manner. The tall man who had first spoken pushed the Scot aside and peered into the wagon. Wallace growled and the stranger snarled a curse at the dog.

"Anybody with you?" he demanded, turning to Hamish.

"I'm alone the noo," Hamish replied.

"Hobble the horses, boys," the tall man directed. "We'll camp."

"Muster Ferguson—" Hamish began.

"We're friends of Ferguson's," the tall man interrupted. "It'll be all right with him, Scotty."

Hamish doubted the statement, but said nothing more. The tall man turned to his horse. His companions were already busy with their mounts. Hobbling the animals, they pulled off saddles and bridles, and dumped them under the wagon. The tall man rubbed his bearded chin.

"I'll sleep in the wagon," he announced. "Chick, you and Dobie can use the saddle blankets."

"Let the blasted sheepherder sleep outside," Chick, the smallest of the men, growled his sentiments.

"An' have him go lopin' off to tell everybody we're here?" the tall man demanded. "Not me." He shook his head. "Not Bill Abree! I don't do that. I'll sleep with him an' try to keep from gettin' lousy."

Chick growled a curse, and Dobie, silent until now, spoke harshly: "Bill's right. I don't crave to bunk with no sheepherder. Come on, Chick."

"We'll look over your beddin', Scotty," Abree announced. "Climb in the wagon an' show us."

Hamish climbed into the wagon. There was something about these men that spoke of peril. Hamish was not afraid—no true McDonald was ever afraid—he was simply canny. His eyes were small and there was a red glint in them, and anger was ruffling the long hair at the back of his neck, but he obeyed Abree's order.

At the door of the wagon Wallace sprang out, snarling, and Abree, recoiling from the attack, kicked once, swiftly. The little sable dog went flying, his agonized yelp shrill and high. That broke the restraint that held Hamish. Big hands extended like claws, he roared and leaped, taking up the attack where Wallace had dropped it. Abree recoiled, but Dobie, just at the tail gate of the wagon, shot out his hand and caught Hamish's leg. Hamish went down, and Dobie, sliding his gun out of its holster, chopped down hard with the weapon's barrel, poised the gun, and struck again.

The second blow was unnecessary. Red lights danced across Hamish's eyes as he went down. Then the red lights gave way to blackness.

Returning from that blackness, his head one vast and throbbing ache, Hamish blinked his eyes open. Darkness enshrouded him. Painfully he tried to sit up, but could not. His hands were tied. When he squirmed he found that his feet also were lashed together, but the movement at least brought him in-line with the door. Through its opening he could see a star, and as he looked at the star he became aware of a regular, rhythmical sound immediately adjacent. Someone was snoring.

With a grunt Hamish relaxed on the hard floor of the wagon box. There was a small whine, and then Wallace thrust his cold nose against the sheepherder's cheek.

"Lie doon, Wallace," Hamish whispered to the little dog. "We'll bide awhile, d'ye ken?" Wallace curled down beside his master.

Morning broke, cold gray light coming through the door. Hamish was stiff and chilled, and Wallace, with the light, got up and stole away. On the bed Bill Abree stirred, turned over, and sat up. He looked down at Hamish and rubbed sleep from his eyes.

"Cooled off, Scotty?" Abree demanded.

"There was no need to kick the wee dog," Hamish growled.

"I'll kill him if I see him," Abree announced pleasantly, getting out of the bunk.

The tall man strode to the door of the wagon, casually stepping over Hamish. He spoke to the others, who evidently were up, turned and came back to the man on the floor. Abree had slept fully dressed, boots and all. Now he bent down and loosened the rope that bound Hamish's wrists, freed them, and devoted his attention to the lashings on Hamish's feet.

"Get up an' rustle breakfast, Scotty," he commanded. Stiffly Hamish got to his feet. "An' don't get any funny ideas," Abree concluded. Hamish made no answer.

His eyes had sought and found the big gun that bumped against Abree's hip.

Hamish prepared breakfast. Wallace, guided by the instinct that looks after small dogs, was not in evidence. Abree, Chick and Dobie ate the food that Hamish dourly set before them. The bucks were off the bed ground and Hamish looked anxiously to where they grazed. As they ate, Abree and his fellows talked a little. Hamish could not make anything of their conversation. The talk was of another man, Nick. Mostly it was composed of conjecture as to Nick's whereabouts and probable arrival. When he finished eating, Abree picked up a rifle that leaned against his saddle.

"See this, Scotty?"

"Aye," Hamish grunted.

"Go on out with yore sheep." Abree's grin was not pleasant. "I'll be watchin' you—with this rifle. Don't get out of sight an' don't try anythin'."

Hamish nodded and strode out toward the grazing bucks. All that day he stayed with the sheep. At noon he started to walk toward the wagon, but Abree got up and lifted the rifle suggestively, and Hamish went back to the bucks. At midafternoon a solitary horseman appeared and came steadily toward the wagon. Hamish watched him, saw him arrive and dismount, saw the other three arise to greet the newcomer.

For a time there was no activity at the camped wagon. At last a man went out to where the horses grazed, and came back leading the animals. Hamish saw his visitors saddle their horses, and then all four of them came riding toward him. Abree swung off from the others and, reaching Hamish's side, grinned down at him.

"So long, Scotty," Abree said cheerfully. "Don't forget us."

"I'll not forget ye," Hamish answered in a grim voice.

Abree spat, a brown stream that splashed against Hamish's right boot. "Mebbe we'll be back," he drawled. "Better stay with the sheep, Scotty."

Hamish made no answer, and Abree rode off to join his three companions. They rode away, dropping from sight in a fold of earth, going south toward the railroad. After they had been gone awhile, Wallace came crawling to Hamish's feet. The dog was hurt. He whimpered when Hamish touched his ribs. Hamish picked him up and, cradling him in his arms, carried him to the wagon.

He made Wallace comfortable on a blanket taken from his bedding. The wagon was disheveled, everything out of place, Hamish's belongings, his small personal effects, strewn about. The pipes had been pulled down from where they hung on a wagon bow, and thrown close to the fire. One of the ribbons that decorated the drones was burned, and another was smoldering. Hamish rescued the pipes and methodically began putting things to rights. His face was stern, forbidding as the crags of Ben Nevis high above

Moidart. In Hamish the slow. Scottish anger was rising. The steel plate that protected the toe of his heather boot clinked against rock, and Hamish aimed an angry kick at the stone.

As the sun went down, Hamish went out to the sheep again. Bringing them in to the bed ground, he held them there. The bucks lay down, one at a time, following their customary routine, taking their ease. When they were bedded, Hamish went back to the wagon. Once more he examined Wallace. The small dog whimpered when Hamish's big gentle hand touched his bruised side.

Dusk was all across the valley. Down below, the tiny black ribbon that was the line of tracks was hidden, but Hamish could mark its place. From the west the evening glowworm was crawling, and through the thin October air Hamish heard the faint shrill of the train's whistle. Standing by the tail gate of his wagon he marked the progress of the lighted cars.

Something unusual was happening down there. The train, which always before had crawled steadily along the valley, drew to a stop. The lights did not move. Faintly through the still evening came a popping, a small sound as of firecrackers exploding at a distance. Hamish watched the train. For a long time it stood there, the lights unmoving, and then it began to crawl along again. In the wagon Wallace whined and Hamish, turning from his watch, went in to see what ailed the little dog.

He had resettled Wallace and given him a drink, he had rebuilt the fire and was examining the remnants of his provisions when, once more, he heard horses coming. Hamish reached hastily to the bundle where his dirk was hidden. His big hand, groping, failed to find the knife. It was gone. Outside the wagon the horses had stopped. Voices sounded.

"Where's that blasted sheepherder? I told you we ought to have killed him, Bill. He's gone!"

A groan followed the statement, and then Bill Abree spoke. "Help Chick down. Hang you, Nick! Why didn't you tell us that there was guards? Dobie's dead an' here's Chick bad hurt! Give me a hand!"

Hamish McDonald, moving stealthily within the wagon, brushed his gray hair against something. He reached up his hand and felt the smooth wood of a drone. Outside Bill Abree called:

"Hey, Scotty. Come out of there! His fire's burnin', Nick. He ain't far off."

Hamish placed his lips against smooth wood. Beneath his elbow the bag swelled. Then from within the canvas walls of the wagon came a sound, a shriek as of the damned. coupled with the droning and undertone of lesser shrieks. Beside the fire a man yelped shrill fright; and horses, weary and hard ridden, threw up their heads. Once more the shriek came, turbulent and bubbling. It was too much. With heads held high, the horses stampeded out into the darkness, pursued

by that terrifying, bubbling shriek.

A shot roared and the shriek checked as all the wind went out of the punctured bag. Inside the wagon Hamish McDonald dropped to the floor. His big hands reached for his feet and plucked off a heather boot. Gripping that five-pound, steel-shod weapon, he rose and made for the door.

At the wagon door he met a man. The heather boot rose and fell with a wicked chunking sound, and the doorway was empty. Then, like a clansman at Bannock Burn, swinging the heather boot like a claymore, and with the wild Highland yell on his lips, Hamish McDonald came out of the wagon.

Bill Abree fired two shots. In the uncertain light of the flickering fire and with that wild giant figure descending upon him, the shots were hurried and ineffectual. The second had barely left the muzzle of the gun before Hamish was upon Abree and the heather boot, whistling down, ended its arc against the man's head. Bill Abree lost all interest in subsequent events.

III

In Bridlebit, No. 13, westbound, drew to a halt. Five minutes after that stop the hand of the telegraph operator was dancing above his key as he flung a message along the wires toward the county seat, and the conductor and engineer, and the fireman of the train with a bloody rag about his head, were panting out a story to Ian Gordon. Gordon listened, his gray eyes growing smaller, slitting thinner as the tale unfolded. When the conductor started to repeat himself, Gordon interrupted.

"There's three or four boys from the OYO down at the Bull Head," he said to the town marshal, who stood close by. "Get 'em up here. Get Harvey Thomas from the livery barn, and tell him we'll want horses. Now"—turning again to the conductor—"you said that one of 'em was killed?"

"The express messenger shot one of them before they got him," the conductor agreed. "There was two guards, too. They shot a couple of times apiece. One of 'em's wounded an' the doctor's fixin' him up. He—"

Again Ian Gordon interrupted. "We'll want an engine an' a box car to haul the horses," he declared. "Think we can get 'em? An' we'll want somebody along to show us just where to stop. Can you go?"

"I got my train to look after," the conductor reminded. "The guard that ain't hurt can go. They got the gold shipment an' he ain't got anything more to guard. You goin' after 'em tonight?"

"In about fifteen minutes," Gordon agreed. "The sooner— Hello, Curly."

Curly Welch paused in the door. His eyes were bright with a dancing deviltry and the corners of his lips turned up. "Marshal said you wanted to see us boys, Ian," he stated.

"Need you for a little business." Gordon returned the boy's grin. "How

about takin' a trip on the railroad, Curly?"

"Me an' the boys would be delighted," the OYO man answered promptly.

Fifteen minutes had been too short an estimate. It was a full two hours before an engine coupled to a box car puffed out of Bridlebit, bound east. In the box car rode Ian Gordon, Curly Welch, two other OYO riders, an express-company guard—disheveled and still craving to talk—and three hard-bitten townsmen of Bridlebit. At the far end of the car were saddled horses, nervous because of their unaccustomed surroundings. The men squatted against the car walls, here and there a cigarette gleaming, and Ian Gordon spoke to the guard.

"All we want out of you," he said wearily, "is to show us where it happened. That's all. You had your chance at 'em an' you missed."

"I hit one," the guard returned in a surly tone.

"One!" Gordon grated contemptuously.

Wheels clicked over the rail joints. The engine's headlight bored into the night. In the box car the horses lost some of their apprehension, and the men spoke quietly. The clicking on the rail joints slowed and the express guard got up.

"This is pretty close," he announced and, lifting a lantern from the floor, went to the door. Leaning out, he waved the light. Up ahead the engine said, "*Boot . . . boot—*" softly, and the clicking slowed further. Stopped.

Gordon and the express guard took the lantern and searched while the others unloaded the horses. In the borrow pit beside the grade they found a body. Dobie lay sprawled on the dirt, inert and lifeless. The guard and the deputy did not know who the man was; they simply knew that the body was that of a dead train robber.

"I told you we got one of 'em," the guard boasted.

"The messenger got him with his shotgun," Gordon grunted. "Which way did they lead out?"

"North, I think," the express guard answered.

"We got the horses unloaded," announced Curly.

"We'll make a circle north," Gordon stated. "You"—to the guard—"can stay here an' look after this." He gestured toward the body.

The possemen mounted. Curly rode beside Gordon as they struck toward the north. Behind them stood the engine crew and the express guard, the lantern making a little circle about their feet, and a torch in the engineer's hand sending smoky light skyward.

"We ain't goin' to find 'em in the dark," Curly remarked.

"No," Gordon agreed, "but we'll make a little circle anyhow. If there was another one hurt, they might not go far."

"I think—" Curly began, and then stopped, reining in his horse. Gordon, too, reined in and behind them

the other stopped. Faint and thin, a sound came to them through the night.

"Holy mackerel!" Again Curly broke off in mid-sentence.

"Fire up there." Gordon pointed through the gloom. "See it?"

"I see it, but what's that noise?"

Again the men listened, bending forward as though the posture would heighten the sound. "I never—" Gordon began. And then: "It's that darned Scotchman. We'll go to the fire."

They rode steadily, and the splash of light against the northern hills grew brighter. Those same hills acted as a sounding board. As the glow of the fire increased, so too did the sound. The horses cocked their ears and moved nervously, requiring firm hands upon the reins. Down from the mountains came the sound of the pipes. Ian Gordon and Curly Welch and their followers did not realize it, but they were hearing a master's rendition of "Cock of the North." Now, back and forth across the glowing dot that was the fire, something moved, alternately freeing and blotting out the light. Ian Gordon reined in his nervous horse and sent a call into the night.

"Hey, there! You at the fire!"

The movement across the fire ceased, as did the music. Music it was, weird and faint and sweet in the night. Again Gordon called: "You! There at the fire!"

An answer came, faint as the music had been and indistinguishable. Once more Gordon started his horse forward, the others moving with him. The fire grew brighter.

"This is the law," Gordon called again. "Hey! Answer me!"

A figure stepped into the firelight. The voice that answered Gordon's summons was harsh and rasping, and there was a ring of triumph in it.

"The law? Weel, I mus' say it's aboot time!"

In the firelight the possemen dismounted. There, prone at the edge of the circle, two bound men lay tied hard and fast: Bill Abree and the man called Nick. Beyond them, just outside the firelight, lay another shadowy figure. After one hasty glance Ian Gordon and his companions did not look at the bound men. Their attention was claimed and held by Hamish McDonald.

Hamish stood straight and tall and broad beside his campfire. His pipes were in his hands, the bag under his arm, the drones cocked across his shoulders. He eyed his visitors defiantly.

"What's happened here?" Gordon demanded. "What—"

Bill Abree stirred, twisting in his bonds. Hamish looked down and his voice was stern. "Lie still or I'll dint ye anither."

Bill Abree lay still, and Gordon spoke again. "What happened here?"

Once more Hamish faced the officer. "They ate ma food," the Scot announced indignantly, recounting his wrongs. "They kicked ma dog, an' they made a hole in the bag of ma pipes."

Curly Welch had moved around

the fire and bent above a box. "Here's the gold shipment, Ian," he announced, straightening.

Out beyond the firelight a match flamed and went out. Another posseman spoke. "This here's Chick Walters. He's dead."

Ian Gordon faced Hamish McDonald again. "And so?" he prompted encouragingly.

"So," Hamish concluded. "I lost ma temper. I bashed 'em."

Curly had left the small box and now stood above Bill Abree. Again Abree stirred and Hamish took a hasty step in his direction. Abree's voice went up in a wail. "Keep him off of me. We done it. Nick come in with the news of the bullion shipment, an' we held up the train. Keep that blasted Scotty off of me!"

Across Ian Gordon's stern face a smile spread, trembling first at the corners of his mouth, spreading from that point. Once more he looked at Hamish McDonald. "You bashed 'em, did you?"

Hamish nodded, shamefacedly. "Aye. There was nothin' else to do, d'ye see? I bashed 'em. I was just playin' a wee bit tune to celebrate the veectory."

"We heard the music," Ian Gordon said. "That's what brought us here."

Perhaps it was the reflection of the fire, but Hamish's eyes seemed to light. "Music, did ye say?" he queried unbelievingly.

"Music," Gordon replied firmly.

Hamish's fingers moved on the lifeless chanter. He blew softly into the mouthpiece and under his elbow the patched bag of his pipes swelled gently. "Peerhops," he said, "ye'd like to hear the rest of the toon. 'Twas 'Cock of the North' I was playin'."

Ian Gordon glanced at his men. They had found their quarry. They could not go farther before morning. He turned and looked back toward the south. On the tracks the engine stood, its headlight a thin beam piercing the darkness.

"We can't take 'em in before mornin'," Curly commented, voicing Gordon's thoughts. "We got to stay till then anyhow."

Ian Gordon nodded firmly. "Might as well," he observed. "Take hold of your horses, boys. And hold 'em tight!"

Once more he turned to Hamish McDonald. "Go ahead," he commanded. "Let's have some music, Scotty."

Warmth welled up in Hamish McDonald. "Music," Gordon had said. Music! Hamish cleared his throat.

"Ye'll find a bottle in the wagon," he stated. "The gomerals dinna find it. 'Tis under the bed. I'll just warm ma pipes the whilst ye look for it an' then I'll finish the wee toon for ye." He paused and his eyes sought and found Curly Welch.

"I mought," completed Hamish McDonald, piper, at home in his own country, "e'en play a bit o' 'The Campbells Are Comin'' after that."

THE END

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MUDDY WATER GAMBLING MAN

The night Cord Stanton risked his rep as a square-shooting tinhorn, Death had the cards stacked against him

By Norman A. Fox

I

THE last of the cargo had been loaded here in St. Louis, and this Fort Benton-bound packet, the *Pegasus*, had built its steam for the up-river run, when Cord Stanton, making his stand on the saloon deck, saw the girl climb the gangplank, a pert and pretty figure in the steady stream of boarding passengers.

Two rules of conduct made Cord Stanton a man apart among Missouri River gamblers; he never carried a gun and he never took a drink. But now he passed a hand before his eyes, made a right turn into the ornamented saloon, came to the deserted bar where burly Mike Robin presided, and said hoarsely: "Whiskey, Mike. Pour me a drink of whiskey!"

Mike Robin shook his balding head

and obeyed. He had worked with Stanton on many a run, listening to the liquored talk of saloon-deck passengers and steering the poker-and-blackjack-minded ones to Stanton's table and collecting a percentage of the winnings for such a service. He came as near to knowing Stanton as any man did, this Mike Robin. But he never probed into the mystery that was Cord Stanton, gambling man, and he didn't now.

There were tall and varied tales told of Cord Stanton along the serpentine length of the Big Muddy. They said he had been a Confederate blockade runner in the recent war between the States; they said he had worn the blue of a cavalry captain and had served the Union well in Pennsylvania. They claimed he had yet to see thirty; they swore he had grandchildren in New Orleans and that the black of his hair came out of a dye bottle.

They whispered that he wore no gun because he was smoke-shy; they whispered that he wore no gun because he was death with one. They said many things, most of them contradictory. But they knew him as a straight gambler. That, in itself, was the sum of Mike Robin's knowledge, too. But he gave Cord Stanton loyalty, and with it went responsibility, so he said: "You look like you'd seen a ghost, boss."

Stanton tilted the bottle and let the liquor run, then wiped his chin with a bandanna he took from his breast pocket. He was no flash-and-fooforaw gambler with a frilled handkerchief up his sleeve. He wore black that made the six foot of him seem longer and leaner, and he kept a mask for a face.

"A ghost, Mike?" he said. "Maybe I have." And he fell to speculating on the fact that a door to memory, left ever so slightly ajar, could be kicked wide open in an instant.

Ran Beauchamp came catfooting up to the bar, and Stanton got a glimpse of the man in the long mirror, seeing Beauchamp's familiar smile which was all teeth and no heart.

"You drinking, Stanton?" Beauchamp said. "Now I've seen everything, friend."

He was a gambler who'd cut his first deck on the old Mississippi show boats, this Beauchamp, and the stamp of that school was upon him. His vests ran to color, his trousers were made of doeskin, and he wore a brown beaver tilted at the proper rakish angle. He'd worked the *Pegasus* before and so had Stanton, and because they'd taken each other's measure in the past, Stanton frowned.

"I'm drinking alone, Ran," he said pointedly.

"I've been looking for you, friend," Beauchamp said. "But it was to be a business call, not a social one. Have you seen the passenger list? The deck is loaded with a patched-pants outfit heading for the Montana diggings to break their fool backs. But the cabin passengers include quite a few miners who are on their way back to good claims—muckers who had enough left in their

pokes to buy first-class tickets and have something to spare. And there's a lot of broadcloth aboard, besides. The pickings should be good."

A tremor ran through the packet, the whistle cried again, the huge paddle wheels beginning their sloshing as the boat slowly backed into midstream.

"What is it that you're trying to say, Beauchamp?" Stanton asked impatiently.

Beauchamp's smile faded. "You don't like me, friend; and I don't like you. You don't care for the way I deal my cards; and I don't cater to having a gambler aboard with your rep for straight dealing. It makes the passengers choosey. But the boat's always been big enough for the pair of us. Up till now. There's a name on the passenger list: Thomas J. Hardwick, of Fort Benton. Remember it, friend. And remember that he's my private bear meat. That's all."

Stanton shrugged. "I play with any man who comes to my table reasonably sober and asks to be dealt in. I'm not interested in names."

Beauchamp skinned back his long-tailed black coat, the movement giving a glimpse of a walnut-handled revolver in an armpit holster. "I'm not *asking* a favor, friend," he said. "I'm *telling* you what I want. A man who doesn't carry a gun can't be very good with one."

One of Mike Robin's pudgy hands dropped out of sight below the bar, but Stanton shook his head and the wary stiffness went out of the barkeep's hunched shoulders.

"You've had your say, Beauchamp," Stanton observed. "I've listened to you. Good day."

Beauchamp began to frown and ended by shrugging. "The name is Hardwick—Thomas J. Hardwick," he repeated and catfooted out of the saloon.

Mike Robin sucked in a long breath. "I saw a bullwhacker cross him once in Yankton," he said reminiscently. "Beauchamp used one bullet to cut the whip out of the man's hand, another to split his heart. Maybe I'd better spot this Hardwick gent so we'll know him when we see him."

But Cord Stanton, deep in his own dark thoughts again, picked the bottle from the bar with no sign that he had heard. "I'm going to my cabin," he said. "I'll see you tonight, Mike."

II

The cabin deck was crowded as Cord came along it. Passengers lined the rail to watch St. Louis fade into the distance, others harrying the colored deck crew with frantic questions about staterooms and luggage. All this made an old and familiar pattern that Stanton had witnessed many times before, and he elbowed his way through the chaos of the deck and came to his own reserved stateroom near the bow.

Cord had left the door unlocked, and when he entered he kicked the door shut behind him and set the whiskey bottle on the stand beside

his bunk. Then he spun about, drawn by a sound that was no more than the shadow of a sob, and stood facing the girl who'd been hidden behind the door. She had a pearl-handled, fancy-inlaid .45 in her hand, the barrel tilted to the height of Cord's heart.

He said: "Easy! That gun has a hair-trigger!"

"So you remember it!" she cried. "That makes you Cord Stanton, for sure. I'm wondering if you know who I am."

Cord had a better look at her now than he'd gotten as she walked up the gangplank. She was tall enough to come to his armpit, and she wore silk as if she'd been born to it. Her eyes were brown and so was her hair, and her ways were quick ways that brought thrusting memories.

He said: "You were about fourteen when I last saw you, though you didn't know about that. You're nineteen now. The years have turned you from a girl into a woman, Libby. But I'd know you anywhere. You're Althea Libby all over again. How did you find me?"

"From the passenger list. It was just by chance. I was looking over the names to see if I happened to have friends aboard."

"And now you're going to kill me," he judged. "But before you pull that trigger, there's one thing I've got to know. When Lucky Dan Larrimore was found dead in Memphis with my gun on the floor beside him, why didn't your mother turn that gun over to the police right then and tell them who owned it?"

"I don't know," the girl answered. "She's told me all of the story but that part of it. Yes, I know that you and my father were once partners—a pair of gamblers working the Mississippi boats. I know that you both fell in love with the same girl—my mother—and that one of you stood as good a chance as the other of winning her. I even know that the two of you finally cut cards to see which one was to have his try, which one was to fade from the picture. My father won that cut; they didn't call him Lucky Dan for nothing."

She had tears in her eyes, but she kept them out of her voice. "For fifteen years neither my mother nor my father ever saw you, and then you chose to come back into their lives. My mother and I came back from a visit up river to find dad dead and your gun beside him. Yet mother kept the truth from the police. Maybe she felt that your punishment would overtake you anyway. Maybe she's always been half in love with you. That's the part I don't know. But I've kept this gun of yours, and I've waited and hoped. I'm her daughter, but I'm also the daughter of Lucky Dan Larrimore."

There was no note of hope in Cord's voice as he said: "Will you hear my side of it?"

Libby made a quick gesture that was like her mother. "My father was a straight gambler. He made a gamble with you, and you proved yourself a poor loser fifteen years afterwards. There's nothing you

could say now that I'd want to hear."

The steel went out of Cord Stanton's spine, and he looked the years that some men claimed he had known. "Then get it over with," he said.

She laughed, a thin sound with a hysterical edge to it. "I can't!" she cried. "I need you alive. Can't you see how funny that is? For five years I watched every face that passed me, hoping it would be yours, hoping I'd recognize you somehow. And now I have to bargain with you."

"Bargain?"

"I was married a week ago today," she explained. "My husband and I are on our way to Fort Benton where his father runs the Missouri Freighting Co. My husband came down river to raise funds his company needs badly. He's carrying ten thousand dollars to his father—not as much as he'd hoped to get, but enough to bolster the company until they can beat the price-cutting schedules of Montana Transportation, a rival outfit. My husband is desperate, and I know the thought that's in the back of his head. He has a weakness for cards, and he intends raising more money by gambling. I've got to see that he doesn't lose what he's carrying."

"Meaning?"

The gun sagged in Libby's hand. "You've got to see that he plays at your table," she insisted. "You've got to see that, whether he wins or loses, he breaks even in the end. He can't jeopardize that money, do you understand! Make sure he reaches Fort Benton with it, and I'll give you this gun and you can drop it overboard. Refuse to help me, and I'll have no choice. I'll either shoot you down, or I'll turn this gun over to the Memphis authorities and tell them who once owned it. Lucky Dan had friends in Memphis, Mr. Stanton, influential friends. The wilderness won't be big enough to hide you if I put the law on your trail."

"Who is this man who thinks a deck of cards is the way to easy money?" Stanton asked curiously.

"Hardwick," she said. "Tom Hardwick. I'm Libby Hardwick now. I'm not sure that your word is worth any more than a Confederate shin-plaster, but I want your promise that you'll keep him from being trimmed."

"Hardwick," he repeated. Ran Beauchamp's talk, and that quick gesture by which Beauchamp had revealed his gun, and the tale of a bullwhacker who had died suddenly and violently in Yankton all came back to Cord. But, more than that, he saw a vista of possibility for himself that had grown dim through the marching years, the misty outline of a hope long faded. Cuffing the whiskey bottle off the stand to smash on the floor, he made his most sweeping bow to Libby Hardwick.

"Lady," he said, "you've just made yourself a deal."

III

Cord Stanton had struck a bargain, but many days were to pass before he had his chance to keep his part of it—days in which the sloshing pad-

dle wheels of the *Pegasus* put many watery miles behind, Kansas City and St. Joseph and Council Bluffs vanishing in the frothy wake of the packet.

Spring rains had lifted the tawny river, and spring breezes brought the aroma of budding flowers and the song of nesting birds. Luck smiled upon this run, and there was laughter from the main deck at the water's edge to the cupolalike pilothouse perched atop the texas, passengers and crew alike finding enjoyment in the trip.

They had an everchanging panorama of scenery to watch; there was the excitement of wooding the boat and shooting at game from the hurricane deck, and racing with other upriver-bound packets, and thus varied events broke the monotony of the watery way. All was well aboard the *Pegasus*—but not for Cord Stanton.

He did his work by night, when the pilot, wary of the changing channel, ordered the packet tied up to some timbered bank. Then men thronged the saloon to test the fickleness of Dame Fortune. Cord slept by day while the engines throbbed and the boat nosed upstream, "grasshopping" over sandbars, but he found hours for pacing the deck and thinking, and his brooding judgment was that there were passengers aboard not listed by the steward: Greed and Avarice, Love and Loyalty, Hope and Futility. And some night these would show themselves and demand their due. It had to be, and he who hoped for a reckoning wondered what he would do when the reckoning came.

There was Libby Hardwick, who bore her mother's maiden name and who looked as her mother had looked when Cord Stanton and Lucky Dan Larrimore had cut cards for her hand. There was Ran Beauchamp who wanted a corner on Hardwick money, and there was Tom Hardwick who knew a desperate need to run ten thousand dollars into a larger sum. And there was himself, Cord Stanton, who had passed his word to stand between Tom Hardwick and men like Ran Beauchamp.

So far the bargain had entailed no effort; Tom Hardwick had kept out of the saloon, and Stanton wondered how Libby had managed that. But this run was far from over, and on a night when the packet was tied up below Yankton, on the fringe of Dakota Territory, Hardwick stalked into the gilt and glitter of the *Pegasus*' saloon.

Mike Robin saw him first. The bartender's eyes passed a signal and a warning to Stanton, proof that Robin had marked this man beforehand. Stanton had his look at Hardwick then, seeing a tall, blond youngster in broadcloth, neither man nor boy but possessed of the responsibility of the one and the wildness of the other. Ran Beauchamp, at his corner table, saw Hardwick too and was smiling his toothy smile as Stanton came from behind his crescent-shaped table to saunter to the bar.

"Send him to my table," Cord said low-voiced when he'd gotten Robin's ear.

"But, boss—" Mike protested.

"Send him to my table," Stanton repeated and, turning his back to the bar, returned to his table.

After the third drink, Tom Hardwick came. He smiled a quick and charming smile as he faced Stanton, and the gambler could understand why Libby Larrimore had been won by this man.

"They tell it that you deal 'em straight, gambler," Hardwick said.

Stanton lifted his shoulders, a gesture that held no commitment. "What is your pleasure?" he asked. "I fancy blackjack. Have you got a stomach for strong betting?"

Now blackjack is a game in which a man tries to get cards of varying face values totaling twenty-one, drawing as many as he wishes from the dealer but losing if he exceeds twenty-one. It was a game to Cord Stanton's liking for it depended upon luck, the law of averages insuring a gambler a fair percentage of returns. So he said: "I can stand strong betting, if *you* can," a remark pointed enough to put a shadow across Tom Hardwick's smile. And then the game was on.

They started with ten-dollar bets, and Hardwick had a run of luck that moved him to raise the ante to twenty-five, and then to fifty dollars. After three hundred dollars had crossed the table from Stanton to Hardwick, some of the money began to dribble back. But Tom Hardwick was having a run of luck that had no changing, often standing pat on a pitifully poor hand and watching Stanton deal himself out, and when it was time to close the table, Hardwick was some four hundred dollars richer than he'd been.

"I'll see you tomorrow night, gambler," he said.

Ran Beauchamp had been playing poker with a government agent en route to Benton, and a hog-hairy miner returning to an Alder Gulch claim, the three holding down Beauchamp's table until closing time. But Beauchamp's anger was a sword unsheathed in his eyes whenever he'd glanced Stanton's way, and on the deck Stanton found the other gambler waiting for him.

"Maybe you didn't know it, friend," Beauchamp said, his voice brittle, "but you were playing with Hardwick tonight."

Stanton shrugged. "Did you see the run of my cards? All I did was fatten the pot for you."

But that placated Beauchamp not at all, and by such a token Stanton saw the faint outline of the other's real purpose. "I've told you what I want, friend, and you've chosen to ignore it," Beauchamp said. "Don't make me force a fight. Just see that it doesn't happen again."

Stanton realized then that there'd be a showdown between him and this man before the deal was played out, and he fell to wondering if this wasn't as good a time for it as any. Then: "Good night," he said and brushed past Beauchamp to head for his cabin.

IV

He found another awaiting him there, and somehow he was not sur-

prised. Shapeless beneath a cloak, Libby Hardwick stood by the railing, faintly etched by the slanting rays of the last moonlight.

When she saw Cord she said breathlessly: "I kept him in line all this time, showing him that he might win a greater stake for Missouri Freighting, but that more likely he'd lose what he had and doom the company's chances for good. But tonight he went to the saloon."

"I know," said Stanton. "To my table."

"You let him win?"

"The cards fell that way."

Libby's sigh was one of relief. "Half the trip to Benton is behind us now. Perhaps you'll win your money back. All I want is that he has his ten thousand when he walks down the gangplank. And . . . and thank you, Mr. Stanton."

Cord found his reward in the smiling evidence of her relief, and it suited his fancy to pretend for the moment that she was Althea and that he had banished the shadows from her mother's eyes instead of her own.

But after she had gone, the glow died in him as the run of his thoughts brought a frown to his face. For he had seen the one flaw in Libby's careful scheming. Fort Benton was supposed to bring an end to her worries, but he knew it would be only the beginning of them.

Tom Hardwick must not lose his money; therefore he had to win or break even. Tonight Hardwick had had a phenomenal run of luck, the kind of luck that put gambling in a man's blood. This Cord Stanton knew, for his own beginning had come from such hands as Hardwick had drawn tonight, and Lucky Dan Larrimore and a score of other gam-

Beauchamp already had his iron raised when Cord aimed with the ill-fated gun that had sent Lucky Dan to his death.

blers of Stanton's acquaintance could tell a like tale.

You won where other men lost, and you grew to scorn the toil of hands and back and brain when money could be gotten so easily, and you greased the skids to hell with every pot you took. Thus there was a certain irony in the fact that Tom Hardwick, protected at the green table, might become Tom Hardwick, slave to the green table.

Such was the way Cord Stanton saw it, and when he'd got the lamp to burning in his cabin, he opened his cowhide trunk in the corner and delved deep until he found a certain deck of cards, an unsealed deck, but with the sheen of newness on it. Shuffling the deck, he dealt himself cards face down, studying the intricately-etched design of the backs and seeing in the scrollwork certain minute variations that would have escaped a casual eye. Then he turned the cards over, making sure the faces were as he'd read them from the back.

Most of the following day Cord spent with that deck, studying, studying, studying, dealing the cards, then turning them over for verification, and he had the deck in his pocket when he headed for the saloon that night. But Ran Beauchamp was waiting at the railing just beyond the saloon's door, and before Stanton could enter, Beauchamp put his hand on Stanton's arm, a brusque, belligerent gesture.

"Hardwick's inside," Beauchamp said. "I tried to interest him in cards, but he prefers to wait for you. It's too bad that a headache is keeping you to your cabin tonight, friend."

This had all the shape of a showdown, and because Beauchamp's insistence was all out of proportion to the money involved, Stanton guessed the whole truth then.

"A man hears many things, and sometimes he can put them together," Stanton said. "Could it be, Beauchamp, that you have a reason for not wanting the Missouri Freighting Co., up in Benton, to get its needings?"

Beauchamp skinned back his lips in that toothy smile of his. "Missouri takes trade away from Montana Transportation," he said. "Montana's boss is a shirt-tail relative of mine. More than that, I own

a little stock in the outfit. How did you guess, friend?"

"If it was only Hardwick's money you were after, you wouldn't have cared if I lost to him. But you want him broke, and you want him at your table so you can be sure he's broke."

"You catch on quick, friend. Now hadn't you better go and take care of that headache?"

Cord Stanton brought the crooked deck from his pocket and, fanning out the cards face down, held the hand in a splash of saffron light from the saloon's doorway.

"You're a gambling man, Beauchamp," he said. "Put it this way. You want to skin Hardwick and do it proper. I want a chance to get back four hundred dollars that I dropped last night. How about cutting cards with me? Draw the high one, and I'll keep out of Hardwick's way from here to Benton. But if I get top card, I'm to have my chance at him tonight, and no trouble with you. Is it a deal?"

Beauchamp brushed back his coat to give a glimpse of his armpit gun. "I don't have to cut cards, friend," he reminded.

"No," Stanton conceded. "You don't. But you can't shoot me till you goad me into getting a gun. There's some law on the river, and you'd have to make our ruckus look like an even break. And before I went for a gun, I could go to young Hardwick and tell him about the stock you own in Montana Transportation. Will you take a card?"

For the length of time it takes a paddle wheel to turn, these two men measured each other. Then: "Oh, the devil," Beauchamp muttered and drew a card, his eyes lighting as he turned it over and found it to be the queen of hearts.

But Cord Stanton, known up and down the river as a straight gambler, couldn't miss, and after he'd given the backs of the cards his quick but careful attention, he made his choice.

"A king!" Beauchamp ejaculated, anger choking him for a moment. Then he shrugged. "Your man's waiting," he said.

V

One was a man old in the ways of the green cloth; one was a youngster with a fever in need of curing, and they staged a game in the saloon of the *Pegasus* that night that was to have rivermen talking through the years to come.

They began by betting one hundred dollars on each hand. That was Cord Stanton's suggestion, and Tom Hardwick, flushed with his luck of the night before, was quick to accept. Within an hour one thousand dollars had crossed the cloth to Stanton, and the other games were forgotten as gamblers and players left the tables and men deserted the bar to form a breathless semi-circle at Tom Hardwick's back.

It wasn't a one-sided game; Cord Stanton was seeing to that. And that was what give it spice. With the crooked deck he was using tonight, Stanton could read every card that was dealt, and he knew when to pass himself another pasteboard and when not to. He could have broken

Tom Hardwick as fast as the cards fell, making a quick and certain game of it, but he didn't. He was playing for this boy's soul tonight, the greatest gamble of them all. He had to give Tom Hardwick the heady taste of victory time and again, so that the dregs of defeat would be twice as bitter.

By ten o'clock Hardwick had won back a few hundred dollars, but slowly and inexorably the cash was once again piling up in Stanton's box, and a thin line of sweat etched itself along Hardwick's upper lip as the cards continued to go against him.

He had hooked a finger under his collar and torn it open, and he'd taken to sending to the bar for whiskey, but liquor couldn't make the cards different. There was this to be said for the man of Libby Larrimore's choice, though; he could take it—and he did.

At eleven o'clock Stanton said: "Last night you made talk of strong betting, and you gave me my chance to get my money back when you had the luck. Can you stand thousand dollar hands, mister?"

A ripple of excitement ran through the crowd. This was a golden era of easy money, a day when a man's digging between suns might net him a fortune he'd turn around and lose before the moon rose. But it takes only a few moments to deal a blackjack hand, a thousand dollars is a thousand dollars, and there was a chance of seeing gambling history made this night. Tom Hardwick, a strained, desperate look about him, drew a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"Yes, damn it!" he said.

A hand went to him then, and another; Stanton deliberately drawing past twenty-one and dealing himself out twice in succession. But after that the cards were all Stanton's. In fifteen minutes by the banjo clock above the bar, he took four thousand dollars away from Tom Hardwick.

And so it went through the long evening, the air turning blue with tobacco smoke, the crowd staying silent under the spell of this epic game, the world reduced for Cord Stanton to the crescent-shaped table and the boy across from him.

By the time midnight came Tom Hardwick had an empty wallet, and ten thousand dollars of his money belonged to Cord Stanton when the last hand was faced.

"More?" Stanton asked. "Your I. O. U.'s will be good with me."

Tom Hardwick passed a hand through his rumpled blond hair, a mighty sober man for all the whiskey he'd drunk. "No," he said, "I've played my last hand. My last hand, do you understand! I'm not crying, gambler. They say you're straight, and I believe it. And maybe I should thank you—for teaching me a lesson I'll remember for a lifetime."

So it was over, finished, and the aftermath left Cord Stanton weary, the taste of his triumph tempered by the sobering realization that to-

night he had ceased to be a straight gambler.

And there was Ran Beauchamp to think about. Beauchamp had watched Tom Hardwick go broke, and that must have been to the gambler's liking. But Beauchamp might have wanted that ten thousand dollars as well as the chance to blast Missouri Freighting Co.'s hopes. There was no telling how Beauchamp would react to tonight's doings.

Mike Robin's eyes beckoned Stanton to the bar, and when he crossed over, the gambler dipped under the mahogany and brought an old, serviceable-looking gun to view.

"I've been watching Beauchamp's face all through the play, boss," Robin said. "He's been thinking the kind of thoughts that lead to trouble. Better slip this iron into your pocket."

For a moment Stanton toyed with the suggestion. Then he shook his head. "No, Mike. I could have gotten a gun any time, if I'd thought it was best. But a gun brought me more trouble than it ever brought me good, and I'll use one only when there's nothing else left to use."

He half-expected he'd have Beauchamp at his heels at once, but the other gambler didn't follow when Stanton closed his table and, leaving the saloon, went about a certain piece of business on the texas above.

After that Stanton headed for his cabin. With the lamp aglow, he stretched out on the bunk fully clothed. He was lying there neither sleeping nor thinking, but listening to the lap of the water along the packet's side, when the door opened and Libby Hardwick stepped in. They had made a bargain, these two, and she was to deliver a gun to him when it was finished. She had the gun with her, but once again it was pointed at Cord Stanton's heart.

"Tom's told me," she said, and it was the very evenness of her voice that stirred Cord to a realization of how near to death he was. "Tom's told me everything. You worked it with regular tinhorn finesse, didn't you, Mr. Stanton? First you let him win last night, enough to make him reckless. And tonight you cleaned him to his last dollar. Did you really suppose you could get away with it? You thought I was bluffing because I cornered you once and then bargained with you. Do you still think I'm bluffing, Mr. Stanton?"

Coming to his feet, he said: "That gun's got a hair trigger, remember. Before you pull it, I suggest you climb to the captain's cabin on the texas and ask for a look in his safe. I left a package there with your name—a package that's to be turned over to you at Fort Benton. You'll find Tom's ten thousand dollars in it."

He could tell by the expression on her face that this was beyond her understanding. The gun sagged in her hand, but only for an instant.

"You're bluffing!" she said. "You're bluffing again. Why did you win the money if you meant to return it? That isn't what I asked you to do!"

"When Tom wanted more money,

he turned to cards," Stanton said patiently. "Do I have to tell Lucky Dan Larrimore's daughter what a taste for gambling can do? But Tom found the pickings weren't so easy, and he got cured. He'll live in hell from here to Fort Benton, and every time he thinks of the excuse he'll have to give his father, who is waiting for that money, the more he'll hate gambling. And all you'll have to do, my dear, is to let him sweat until he reaches the gangplank. Now do you understand?"

It took a little time for Libby Hardwick to make her answer, and when she did she was all humbleness and contrition.

"I married him, knowing he had this weakness," she said. "And maybe because it was my father's own weakness, I loved Tom for it. All I could see was the need to get him to Benton with that money. You saved Missouri Freighting Co. tonight, Mr. Stanton, but you did much more than that. You saved Tom for me."

She laid the gun on the stand beside the bunk, and she lifted her eyes to his again. "Maybe I'm beginning to understand why my mother was always half in love with you," she said. "It's small pay I'm giving you for your work, but there's the gun."

"It wasn't the gun I wanted," Stanton told her. "I was hoping for something much more than that. Once I asked you to listen to my side of the story of how Lucky Dan Larrimore died. You wouldn't do it —then."

She said: "I'll listen to anything you have to say, Mr. Stanton. And what's more, I'll believe you."

But Cord didn't begin his say, for suddenly Ran Beauchamp was in the open doorway, that toothy smile upon his face.

"You'll pardon my eavesdropping, friend," Beauchamp said smoothly, "but I had a riddle to solve and I was anxious to get the answer. When you closed your table tonight, you accidentally dropped a card to the floor, Stanton. I have it here. And I've used too many marked decks in my time not to recognize one when I get a chance to study a card closely. You tricked me with that deck, and you tricked young Hardwick. And it seems, friend, that the time has come for the payoff."

VI

Beauchamp eased into the stateroom as he spoke, closing the door behind him and putting his back to it, and Stanton said softly to the girl: "He's a part owner of Montana Transportation, Libby. He hoped to hit at your father-in-law's outfit by fleecing Tom out of that money, and he's failed."

"Failed, friend?" queried Beauchamp. "Have you forgotten? I listened in on this little midnight tête-à-tête. You spoke of a package in the captain's safe. You put it there, Stanton, and you can get it out." He peeled back his coat in

that old gesture of his. "I'll give you five minutes by my watch to be back here with it."

Libby looked from one man to the other, hope and desperation in her eyes, but Stanton took a moment for deliberation and then shrugged. "I've taken every hand but the last one," he observed and touched the girl's elbow. "I'm sorry, my dear."

"You can't—" she protested. But Stanton was edging her toward the door. Ran Beauchamp mockingly stepped aside and made a great flourish of hauling open the door, and then Cord Stanton did two things almost simultaneously.

First he gave the girl a violent shove that sent her lurching out onto the deck. And at the same time he spun on his heel and sent his fist lashing at Beauchamp's chin. That blow had all of Stanton's shoulder behind it, and it might have turned the trick, but Beauchamp saw it coming in time to swerve aside. Stanton's fist grazed the other's shoulder, sending Beauchamp slithering along the wall till his long legs tangled and he went down in a sprawling heap.

Instantly Stanton hurled himself toward Beauchamp, but Beauchamp, drawing up his knees, kicked forward, his boots catching Stanton in the chest and driving him backward to the far wall. Stanton went down sobbing for breath, went down to see the other gambler clawing for that gun in his armpit holster. And Beauchamp got the gun out too, and triggered, the explosion thunderous in the close confines of this cabin.

The bullet might have torn off the top of Stanton's head, if he hadn't swerved. But Stanton made a wild lunge to the side, grasping for the gun Libby Hardwick had laid on the stand beside the bunk, and Beauchamp's bullet thunked into the wall behind him.

Stanton felt the burn of Beauchamp's second bullet along his neck, another bullet numbed his left arm, and he lost count of his hurts then as nausea swept him through a swirling sea with a dozen grimacing Ran Beauchamps always before him. But his fingers had closed on the fancy handle of the gun that had killed Lucky Dan Larrimore, and then Stanton was swinging that gun, firing blindly, firing again and again until at last the gun clicked empty.

After that Libby's face took the place of Beauchamp's in Cord's chaotic vision, and he saw her through a welter of smoke. He realized dimly that she was in the cabin again and that boots were thundering along the deck as men came running, drawn by the sound of gunfire.

"Get out of here!" Cord mumbled. "Get out of here, you little fool!" And he kept repeating it over and over again until the babble of her voice began to make sense to him and he realized the truth she was trying to tell him: that Ran Beauchamp was dead and the danger was over. . . .

They held an inquest of sorts aboard the *Pegasus* that night, the

packet's officers sitting in solemn judgment in the captain's cabin. They decided that when a man was found dead with a smoking gun in his hand, the facts made it justifiable homicide. Their language was that of St. Louis, but they reasoned in the way of the West, for this was Dakota Territory.

They dug one more grave along that river of graves, the Big Muddy, and they lowered Ran Beauchamp into it. And Tom Hardwick, who witnessed that funeral and who had heard all the story from Libby's lips, said:

"That means the end of the trouble dad has been having with Montana Transportation. I didn't know this fellow was the same Beauchamp until tonight, but I do happen to know that he was more than a stockholder in Montana Transportation. He had all the money behind the outfit, and he worked the river boats just to keep his crooked company going."

The ship's doctor had gone to work on Cord Stanton, and there wasn't much to what the medico had to do. They put the gambler in his bunk afterwards, but he was too restless to sleep and the darkness before dawn found him pacing the deck. He was still there when the great engines began to throb and the packet pushed on upstream for the new day's run toward Fort Benton.

Libby found him at the railing, and she said: "We've talked away most of the night, Tom and I. He knows his money is safe and he won't have to do any sweating on the rest of the run. But he's learned his lesson just the same. What one gambler did to help him, another might do to fleece him. He's played his last card."

"Good," said Cord Stanton warmly.

Libby put her hands on the rail and watched the bank take shape in the first light. "There was something you were going to tell me when Ran Beauchamp walked into your cabin last night," she reminded him gently.

Cord nodded. "It's a story that goes back to before you were born—back to the days when both Lucky Dan Larrimore and I were courting your mother. You know we cut cards to see who would have the chance to win her, but you don't know what it cost me to draw the low card that night.

"After they were married, I stayed clear of them. I didn't want to see them—and yet I did, for she was the only woman I ever looked at twice, and he was the best friend I ever had, regardless of everything that had happened.

"It took me fifteen years to get up my nerve, and then I came to your home in Memphis, came to spy on the three of you, for I didn't have the courage to face Althea. And when I did come to your door, I came at a time when I knew that only Lucky Dan was at home. But I came with peace in my heart, and with a gift in my hand. It was something of mine that Lucky Dan

had always admired in the days when we were partners—the fancy gun you found beside him when he was discovered dead."

"You quarreled that day?" Libby asked gently.

Stanton shook his head. "We parted as friends, and I left the gun with him. But it had a hair trigger, as I've told you. When I read in the Memphis papers that he'd been found shot, I knew it could mean only one thing. He'd been examining the gun and it had gone off—an accident. But I knew what Althea might think when the police showed her that gun and recognized it as mine.

"That first week I waited, expecting the police every hour. When they never came, I supposed Althea must have realized the one truth that was in my favor. If I'd gone there and shot Dan Larrimore, I'd never have left such a telltale gun behind me."

"I should have known that, too," said Libby humbly. "But now I can understand many things that I couldn't understand before I met you."

"I've learned too," he told her. "I've always been a straight gambler. Once I wondered how any gambler could want anything so badly that he'd cheat at cards to get it. But for five years I've wanted the chance to tell the story I've just told you, and I even cheated to get that chance."

"Now I know why nothing ever shook my mother's faith in you, not even finding that gun beside dad," said Libby. "Mother is still living in Memphis. The house is big, and I know that she is lonely now that I have left. Will you go and see her, Mr. Stanton, and tell her all that you've told me?"

He nodded, and the spreading light of the new day gave her a better look at him. "Your cheeks are wet!" she cried.

"But not from sadness." Stanton assured her. "All that is behind me now."

Libby left him then, but long afterwards he still stood at the railing. Finally he took a deck of cards from his pocket, a deck with an intricately patterned back, and he looked at the cards long and silently, remembering the night that Lucky Dan Larrimore had produced it and proposed a gamble.

Lucky Dan had won the cut of the cards that night, and Cord Stanton had pocketed the deck and kept it since, never knowing that there'd be an hour when he'd find a need for it. He'd learned the truth about that deck too late, but he'd lived to learn, also, that even the straightest of gamblers might be forced to cheat at times.

Cord Stanton let the cards slip from his fingers into the river, and as he watched the churning wake of the packet catch them and swirl them away, his thoughts were of Memphis and the woman who waited there, and the new life that beckoned.

THE END

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CIMARRON

By S. Omar Barker

Of western rivers fame has known,
Hardiest is the Cimarrón.
Along its course from mouth to head
Horseback men have fought and bled.
Kit Carson and his mountain men
Knew it in the rough days when,
Against Apache red and Ute,
Pioneering first took root.

From hoarded snow amid tall peaks
Gush a dozen clear, cold creeks,
Quick to rush past cliffs of stone
Down to form the Cimarrón.
Down and down through dwindling hills
Out across the plains it spills,
By its deep-washed gullies tanned,
Water for a thirsty land.

Through its mighty canyons passed
Wagon trains that came at last
To a new-found western loam
Fitted for a landman's home.
Up the long trails to its bank
Came the longhorns, lean of shank
Driven by a horseback breed
Born of rawhide Texas seed.

Friendly with its waters low,
Still old-timers live who know
How young cowboys dared and died
Swimming the herd at its flood tide.
Men were rawhide to the bone
On the old-time Cimarrón:
Trapper, cowboy, long-haired-scout—
Men whose code was "Fight it out!"

Cimarrón! The river born
Out of rawhide, hoofs and horn!

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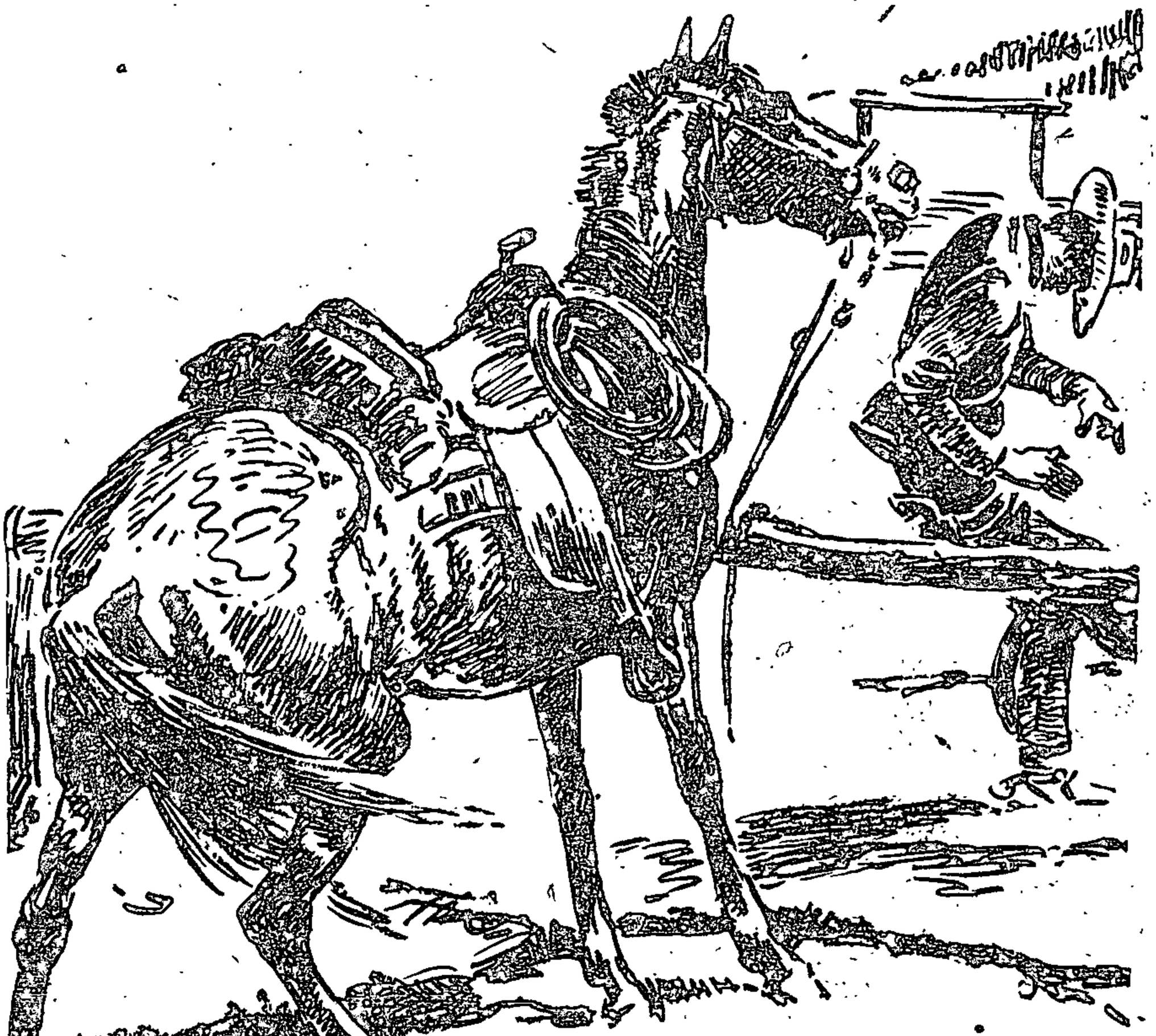

BARBED WIRE, BEEF AND BULLETS

—greeted Court Avis when he came home, and instead of the peace he sought, he found himself branded for bushwhack lead by a power-crazed range hog

By Tom W. Blackburn

I

It was said that Court Avis had been born a bad one. And maybe it was so. But he had been born, also, with the strong-scented, electric blood of the open in him. It was more than a reckless love of life. It was the keen and eager alertness to all things which is a part of the wildness of grass and timberlands. It was a thing of which Court, himself, was seldom aware—as much a part of him as his long, leather-thewed frame and the strong, long-lined features of his face. But strangers always sensed it with a certain uneasiness.

The man in the saddle at Mule Creek ford was uneasy. His eyes slatted one direction and then the other along the trail, patently hopeful of seeing another rider. Court spoke quietly, repeating his question.

"Where's the boundary fence that used to hang on those posts over there?" He pointed to a straggling line of abandoned fence timber. "The Triangle's south boundary?"

The stranger licked his lips. Not that he was necessarily a stranger to the Basin. It was just that Court didn't know him. He could easily enough be a local rider, come in some time since Court had ridden away. It was five years since Court had shot Morgan Benning and had been banished by his father from the Basin for his quick gun.

The man finished with licking his lips and his face flinted over. A challenging curiosity began to glow in his eyes. He twisted a fraction in his kak as though with restlessness. But Court saw the motion and pushed the holster on his right hip free of the cantle and out where he could reach it. His eyes wary, the man spoke.

"Gone."

Court spoke again, impatience rippling through his tones.

"I see that! I asked *where* it had gone. I want an answer!"

The rider smiled slowly. "To hades, I reckon," he said. "Where everything in this valley's bound—including nosy strangers!"

"When I left this valley five years ago," Court said curtly, "Triangle range came clean down to this creek. Triangle was the Avis spread. And in those days I was Jeff Avis' oldest son, Court."

The man beside the fort stiffened.

"Court Avis!" he exploded.

And at the same time, he rocked in his saddle and jerked his gun. Court sensed the thing a fractional instant before it broke. There was no rhyme or reason to it. But there seldom is when one man tries to kill another without warning. Court moved with practised economy of effort and without damaging haste. Yet the rider never fired his gun. Court's slug went under his shoulder, lifted him free of his stirrups, and dumped him limply on the ground. Court gigged his horse forward, intending to go over the man for some clue to his identity and some hint of why the name of Court Avis had come close to being also a death warrant for the man who bore it.

But far up the valley the eerie howl of a wolf echoed out after the crash of his shot. The sound came from a human throat and was plainly a signal of some kind. Closer at hand, hoof thunder beat suddenly up and a troop of riders hammered down toward the ford.

Court wheeled his horse and rode swiftly back in the direction from which he had come for a couple of miles. A sandstone outcropping surfaced there. He veered onto it, leaving no tracks at the edge of the trail, and followed the ledge back to a ridge. Crossing this, he dropped back down to Mule Creek a few miles above the ford. He swam the creek and held on, staying in the timber fringing the Basin until he was a good ten miles from the dead man at the ford and almost abreast

of the sprawled buildings at the home ranch of the Triangle.

A house, fencing, outbuildings and corrals—these things weather with changing seasons. Like a man, they age and the marks of age are visible. But the Triangle bore evidence of more than passing time. Carelessness and the makeshifts of hard times were evident everywhere as Court rode into the yard. It was hard to believe and harder to understand. The Triangle and the Benning Crossed-square had long been the best ranches south of the Bighorn. And no man in Wyoming gave as much attention to his home buildings as old Jeff Avis. Jeff was a hard man, but he was proud, too. And his pride wouldn't have suffered the Triangle to run down like this.

A quick stab of concern cut through Court. Down at Silver City, in New Mexico, he'd run across Bert Walsh, the cattle buyer, who had spoken warningly.

"Jeff didn't send me, Court," he said. "But I've got eyes. I won't say what's up, because I could guess wrong. But if I was you and you still give a hoot about your dad and your brother and the ranch you was raised on. I'd ride north."

That was all there was to it. At first Court had wondered if he did care what happened in the Basin. Morgan Benning had driven him into that fight in the Basin five years ago. Court had given Benning the edge of the draw, and it was kill or get killed when he pulled his trigger. It had been a bitter pill that his dad wouldn't back him up, that his brother, Bob, avoided him, that the whole Basin had seen him ride out without protest.

But time eases all bitterness. And suddenly Court had wanted to ride the roll of Triangle grass again. So he'd ridden north. For three weeks he had clipped along steadily, thinking of the comfortable house, the sleek stock, the well-kept domain of the Avis clan. It jolted him to find the Triangle like this.

And like all times when he was under pressure, the animal caution so strong in Court came to the surface. He swung down at the end of the house, noting a sweaty and recently ridden horse rubbing against the poles of the corral. Stepping onto the veranda, he moved down it on quick, catlike feet and stepped into the main room of the house without making a sound.

There was only one man in the main room. A man in dusty range gear, leaning against the mantel and rolling a cigarette. He was tall, within a couple of inches of matching Court himself. And he was thick—thick and strong through the body. Court had a glimpse of his face and realized that his kid brother had grown up. It was funny to see gangling Bob standing there with a man's body and the set features of a man's face. He started to speak, an eagerness suddenly born in him to be close to the blood of his family again. But before he could get the words out, his brother saw him.

Bob must have caught only a glimpse, for he jerked, spilling the half-rolled smoke from his hands. One hand snapped across his other shoulder to the top of the mantel and snagged up a gun. It swept around, his thumb earing back its hammer as it swung, and settled on a dead line against the doorway. Only then did Bob push himself out from the mantel, shifting to get the light onto the face of the man in the doorway. Then he recognized the stranger who had startled him. But his face didn't clear and he spoke without enthusiasm.

"Court! Why in blazes didn't you knock?"

Court stared at him. He saw the gun in his brother's hand was still steady against the buckle of his belt. And the sullen anger in Bob's tones increased his uneasiness.

"Put that up, kid," Court said. "And haul in your chest! Since when do I knock on the door to my own house?"

Bob lowered the gun but did not sheath it. A faint, mocking smile appeared behind his eyes. He stood motionless, without greeting or friendliness. Court felt heat beginning to build within him.

"Where's dad?" he demanded.

Bob lifted his free hand, pointing out the window. Court turned. Out in the meadow below the house there was a little hillock. On its pinnacle was a natural shaft of granite. He remembered his mother had always called it Notre Dame, after a picture of a great church she kept in her room. The hillock and its spiring granite had some resemblance to the picture. The name had stuck. When his mother died, old Jeff had buried her out there on the summit. Slowly it dawned on Court that his father was out there now—with his mother. He turned back. Bob watched him without expression.

"When?" Court asked quietly.

"A month ago."

"How?"

Bob moved forward. "Let's save trouble, Court," he said. "I don't want words with you. Dad ran you out of the Basin once. Told you never to come back. As far as he was concerned, you were dead. That's the way it is with me now. Dad left me the Triangle. I'm trying to handle it the way he did. He wouldn't want you to know how he went. He never even sent for you. And if he were here now he'd run you out again. I won't do that. You're my blood. But I wanted to make it plain. There's no place for you on my ranch!"

Court sensed a purposefulness in his brother. A thin echo of old Jeff's iron resolves. But there was weakness in Bob, too. Court had always known that. Bob having inherited the Triangle would account for the condition of the ranch—if Jeff had died three years ago instead of a few weeks!

Court turned toward the door. Something was very wrong in the Basin. With his father gone, the home ranch run down, and his brother holding a gun on him for a welcome, there was no pleasure in staying on the Triangle. But the

Basin was a wide place and there were many shelters where a man could bed down.

Bob seemed to sense the course of his brother's thoughts. He followed Court out onto the porch and around to his horse.

"One other thing, Court," Bob said softly, "I should warn you. I just came in from the ford across Mule Creek. A gunhand killed one of Morgan Benning's riders down there a couple of hours ago. The old man is mighty upset, and he's having the Basin combed for the man that did it. You could make it out over the back ridge to the Platte tonight. Tomorrow, if you stay, odds are you'll be stretching a rope!"

Court rode off without an answer to this. Bob was sharp; he'd been sharp as a kid. And he'd been sly. It was strictly a guess, connecting Court with the dead man. Court knew that. And likely Bob's talk of a noose wasn't an idle threat. So long as his older brother lived or hung about the country, Bob's claim to what was left of the Triangle wasn't too good. But all of this didn't bother Court. It was something else.

The dead man at the ford had been a Benning rider—a Morgan Benning rider. And the *old man* was upset! That was the thing that stuck in Court's mind. Five years ago he had put a bullet dead center through old Morgan Benning. He had killed the man dead. Morgan Benning was dust in the ground and long past caring what happened to the riders on the Crossed-square!

Yet Bob had spoken plainly. He talked as though old Benning was still alive. A sudden hunch struck Court. A hunch that was strong and compelling—a hunch born of those whetted instincts which most men feared in him and all men, even his brother, envied.

II

Leaving the Triangle buildings, Court swung diagonally out across the Basin. He held this course for a couple of hours. At the end of that time the lights of another ranch-house appeared against the opposite hills. This was the Benning Crossed-square place. Getting his bearings on the lights, Court swung a little west and circled slowly. In another hour he was in a patch of rolling, broken hills back of the Benning place and at the head of a little canyon that wound down almost into the Crossed-square yard. From this angle he could approach the ranch unseen and have, at the same time, a choice of several trails in case he needed to get away fast.

As he dropped down the little canyon, a strange, nostalgic series of recollections ran through Court. The canyon was pretty, grown thick with second timber and a lot of aspen. The tiny creek which threaded it was clear and cold. Moss overgrew outthrust rocks and the shade was always pleasant. It was up this canyon that Court used to ride with Morna Benning. On a wide ledge half a mile below they had spent many hours, even as kids,

planning the ranch they would make in the Basin when they were married and the Triangle and the Crossed-square were joined.

It was here, too, that old Morgan Benning had seen them. It was about this place he was talking when he collared Court in town a week later and said things about his own daughter that no man should say about any woman. It was about this place and the things old Benning had said that Court had called him, let him make his confident draw, and had killed him—or thought he had.

Thus the pleasant and the bitter were both in Court's thoughts as he dropped his pace and rode slowly toward the ledge. He rode silently, too, like a buck coming to water. It paid dividends, even here. Two people were standing on the mossy rock of the ledge, strongly silhouetted. One of them was Court's brother Bob. The other was Morna Benning—tall, regal, dominantly beautiful, as always. They stood close together, Bob's arms about the girl's shoulders.

Court didn't pull up. Bob's presence here troubled him. True, he had ridden slowly. Bob would have had ample time to cut directly across the Basin. But was news of Court Avis' return sufficient excuse for a long ride in the shag of the night? Riding on, Court grinned wryly and not without a certain bitterness. His brother's world certainly had no place for Court Avis in it. With his older brother out of the way, Bob had the Triangle. And now Morna!

Court had wondered about Morna Benning. He had wondered about himself. Five years may change many things. But sometimes there is something between a man and a woman which never dies. Court didn't know whether he was grateful or displeased at this obvious proof that Morgan Benning's daughter had forgotten the plans they had once made together. It was good, though, to be sure about Morna, to know where she stood. There appeared to be nothing else in the Basin of which he could be sure.

And it was good to know that both Bob and the girl would be out of his way for a little while tonight. He wouldn't have to figure on the possibility of meeting them during the call he planned to make.

The little canyon shortly opened into the upper end of the Crossed-square yard. Lights were up both in the main house and the bunkhouse. But nobody seemed to be stirring outside. Court rode quietly across the wide yard, grateful that old Benning had, in his time, hated dogs and would have none about. Apparently the old man's edict still held.

Court hid his horse in the deep shadow back of the smithy, unhung his spurs, and walked swiftly across to the back of the big house. Prying at windows as he moved along the back wall, he came to one which raised. He went over the sill like a cat and stepped to one side of the opening, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkened interior. He

found he was in one of the many bedrooms along the north wing of the Benning place. The room was unoccupied; in fact, there was no bedding on the springs. But the door was open, giving Court a view down the long back hall. And at the other end, tilted in a chair against the wall, a man was dozing. Court saw he was armed and evidently sitting some kind of guard. He studied the man carefully.

The only possible way to approach the guard was down the hall. There was no shelter in the narrow passage, and it was light enough to outline plainly anyone moving in the passage. Court had to know what kind of man sat in the chair at the other end. One kind of man has an instinct not shared with all of his fellows, an instinct which was highly developed in Court himself. This instinct is that hair-crawling, jolting sensation which warns a man at ease that danger is approaching.

Finally deciding to risk it, Court loosened his gun, stepped into the hall, and walked with a swift, light stride down its length. When he was halfway along, the guard stirred sluggishly. Court quickened his pace. But the man settled and didn't feel the needling of his senses until Court was a yard away. Then he jerked entirely out of his chair. His hand snapped downward to his gun. His jaw fell open and his tongue curled back to let out the bleat of surprise forming in his throat. Court stopped the sound with a quick, measured downward cut of his own gun barrel. He caught the man's sagging figure, lowered it onto the chair, and tipped the seat back against the wall. When he reached out for the knob of the door the man was guarding, it appeared at a casual glance that the guard still dozed at his post.

Court slowly turned the knob under his hand and swung his weight against the door in front of him to keep its hinges from creaking. It opened slowly and silently. A fire burned in a fireplace across the room. In the center of the room a huge table sprawled under a lamp. Books littered its top. Tobacco and a rack of pipes. A tray with some dishes, apparently a meal which had been served earlier.

Court saw these things in one quick, stabbing glance, just as he saw the room was empty, save for one man. His attention riveted, after that first flick of his eyes, on this man who sat in a wheel chair at one end of the table, turned so that he faced the door through which Court came. He was a strange picture of a man. He had a great shock of bleached white hair which should have given him a venerable look but which, instead, only heightened the evil of his heavy, expressionless face.

With one hand, Court pushed the door closed behind him. Thought raced through his brain in a turmoil. He was looking at something he couldn't believe. Yet he had to believe it. A mocking light came into the sharp eyes of the man who sat hunched in the wheel chair.

"Come in, Court," he said. His voice was as odd as the rest of him. It was strained and thin and hard to understand because the lips through which it came hardly moved. "They didn't tell you, eh? Old Jeff didn't tell you! Jeff was a hard man, boy. Harder than you. Almost as hard as me. He ran you out of the Basin. But he didn't tell you I didn't die!"

Watching the eyes, Court saw Morgan Benning thought this was a great joke. He felt cold and tightened his grip on himself. Benning spoke again.

"You should never have come back, Court. You should have been smarter than that. I thought you'd bow your back for the way Jeff turned on you. I never thought you'd come into the Basin again. I made a mistake thinking that. You made one, too. You'll die now, Court. Maybe you did come into the house like a cat. But you'll never get out."

Court moved deeper into the room. "You've been like this ever since we had our fight?"

The old man's eyes flickered assent. "Like this," he agreed. "Paralyzed! I cheated you. I cheated death. But he took a lot from me. I can hear. I can talk. I can see. And my head works. It works like always, Court. But the rest of me is no good."

Court's eyes ran over the body in the wheel chair. It was strange how paralysis shrinks the limbs of some men, dwarfs their whole bodies, yet how in others, it leaves no mark. Morgan Benning had always been a huge man. He was huge, now, helpless in his chair. And though he was helpless, there emanated from his eyes so baleful a promise that Court's body flinched with concern. He pushed forward a little more so that they would not have to raise their voices and thus possibly bring in someone from the rest of the house. Benning's eyes lighted again with mocking humor.

"You can forget to be careful, Court Avis," he said. "I've already made you a promise. You'll not get out of here alive!"

Court drove his question in without attention to the repeated threat.

"You know what's happened in the Basin. I don't. You'll tell me. What happened to dad?"

The mocking humor increased in the terrible eyes. "Yes, I'll tell you, I know. I know all that has happened. I know all that will happen. When a man can't even feed himself, when he's a lump of clay that others have to roll about, when he's helpless and can't do anything but think, he learns some of the things the old Indian sachems knew. He learns how to look forward and how to look backward. Greed killed Jeff Avis. Greed shot him in the back. Greed will kill you, too, Court. It'll kill half of the Basin before it's through. But it won't touch me. I'm already nine tenths dead and not worth the bother!"

The eyes flickered as though the man were laughing loudly to himself. Court started to ask more questions. But there were no more.

His hunch had proved right. Morgan Benning was alive! That was all he needed to know to set about unraveling the evil which lay over the home grass of his boyhood. He understood why his father had never told him Benning hadn't died from his shot. Principle was a god to Jeff Avis. He had believed in lawful settlement of all quarrels. That his son had pulled a gun on another man regardless of the fact that it had been in self-defense and regardless of the foulness of that man or the fact that shot had not been fatal, was the thing that counted. Old Jeff had believed that men who wore guns were servants of the devil.

Slowly Court pulled his gun free. A swift shadow of fear bunched in Morgan Benning's eyes.

"You're going to kill me now?" he jerked out. "I'll tell you something else for a bargain. Three little ranchers have bought out the old railroad lands at the upper end of the Basin. If you ever get out of this house you ride up there and you ask them about Jeff. But shooting me won't help you!"

"Shoot you?" Court asked softly. "You proved once that neither God nor the devil wants you! I'll not waste good powder for that. But I'm getting out of here. I'll see the boys at the upper end. I'll find out about dad. I'll find out about the whole Basin. And when I've done that, I'll be back. If you've had a part in any of it, you'll be paid for that part. We start fresh, Benning, you and me. You didn't die. And now I've come back. Even though you forced me to defend myself I've felt remorse at what happened. I never killed a man who couldn't draw his own gun. And I never killed the same man twice. I don't want to start either, now. Be sure I don't!"

Court raised his gun, then, and fired twice with blinding rapidity across the room at a window in the far wall. The sash ripped out. Somewhere in the house booted feet hammered across rough flooring. Outside, a quick yell smashed into the night, was picked up and echoed by half a dozen voices. With the speed of an automaton, Court punched out the spent shells and reloaded. Then he drove forward, picking up momentum as he raced across the room. He was traveling fast and hunched low when he reached the window. He kicked downward with his feet, ducked his head, and doubled up, going out in a tremendous leap.

Before he struck the ground outside, guns opened up at him, but they were toward the back of the house, Benning's riders evidently expecting the intruder to leave the old man's room the same way he had entered. Court struck solidly, lost his footing, and rolled loosely twice before he was again on his feet and sprinting for the corrals. Doubling around the stock inclosure he came out again behind the barn and was half across to the smithy before the guards unraveled his dodge and picked him up again.

Lead dug at him, but the shoot-

ing was hasty and the light bad. He made the smithy, ducked around it—and found his horse gone!

In the shadow where Court had left the animal, a figure stood. As he plunged into the lee of the smithy, he saw the figure move and heard the metallic, sliding snap of a carbine action, injecting a shell into a chamber. He slid abruptly to a stop. At the same instant a soft, familiar voice warned: "Freeze, cowboy!"

III

Court rocked a little and caught a momentary silhouette of the figure a pair of yards from him. Morna! Her rendezvous with Bob Avis at the ledge in the canyon must have come to an abrupt end. This was something he hadn't figured on. Court took a step forward. Back of him, across the Crossed-square yard, half a dozen men were coming at a full run. Time was doubling up on him. But he couldn't tell about this girl. He didn't know what she would do. There was an almost masculine fearlessness about her and she had a loaded rifle trussed across her hip.

Then, suddenly, Morna saw who he was. Not that she had recognized him. The shadow was heavy enough that even the eyes of a cat couldn't have penetrated it clearly. It was more as though she sensed his identity. Her breath rushed in with a sharp sound.

Court Avis!" she murmured.

Court braced himself. It amounted to less than nothing that he had been in love with this girl once. What counted now was that he had fired the shot which had made a helpless invalid of her father. Morna Benning would hate the man who had done that, hate him with the same virulent savagery with which old Morgan Benning hated him. Court swung his weight to one leg, hoping for some sign the instant she triggered. It might be that he could swing to one side and take a grooving from the slug, rather than a center shot. But the girl didn't pull the trigger. She breathed once more, deeply, then wheeled and ran around the corner of the smithy toward the men running up from the bunkhouse. Court heard them pull to a halt. And in the sudden silence, Morna's voice came clearly, answering the quick question on the lips of one of the men.

"No! He must have seen me at the smithy. He dodged back toward the house again. I think his horse is over that way!"

Surprise tugged at Court. What in thunder was stirring in the Basin? Dead men were come to life. Old Jeff Avis, who hated violence, was dead with a gunshot wound in his back. Court's own brother, who had no score against him, met him at the home ranch—with a drawn gun. And the daughter of a man Court had tried to kill—a girl who should hate him with all the strong bitterness of which her clan was capable—lied to save his skin! It didn't fit, any of it. But now was

no time to try to find a way to work it out.

Wheeling, Court ducked back along the smithy, raced between two abandoned wagons, and lined out for the timber. But he hadn't gone a hundred yards before he spotted a saddled horse tethered at the edge of a little alder clump. Bending that way on a hunch, he found not only Morna's horse, but his own, a yard away. He stopped beside the girl's mount long enough to slide his knife under the cinch webs and drop the saddle to the ground. Then he was into his own kak and flat on the horse's back as it stretched away toward the shelter of the hills back of the ranch. Behind him he heard a shout of alarm, but he was into deep timber where trails were familiar to him, before he could make out plainly what kind of mounted pursuit, if any, was following him away from the Crossed-square.

Far back in the hills on the Benning side of the Basin, Court holed up. He unsaddled, hobbled his horse, and rolled up in a blanket. The sun was two hours high and had already cut the night chill out of the hills when he wakened. He risked a small breakfast fire, ate, and remounted, refreshed and with some of the confusion of the night cleared from his head. Morgan Benning had always been a powerful and headstrong man, independent, and no respecter of codes, moral or legal. Helpless as he was, his cunning, ruthless mind was still whole. Whatever the blight was which had struck the Basin, Court knew the old wolf at the Crossed-square was behind it.

But no wolf is trapped merely because his den and his trail are known. And a human one is cannier than any of the great timber beasts. Court knew that he'd first have to find what Benning was shooting at. Then he'd have to find how the man operated, what kind of crew he used to do work his helplessness kept him personally from. He'd have to measure the whole Basin, counting the noses on either side. When all this was done and there was some equality of numbers between the forces Benning employed and the rest of the Basin, a trap could be set with some hope of regaining the peace and prosperity of which old Jeff Avis had been so proud.

Court held north through the hills during the forenoon, riding for the most part through Crossed-square summer graze on the slopes of the hills. In the old days, Crossed-square and Triangle beef had ranged together, in about equal numbers. Riding along now, Court saw that there were five Crossed-square to every Triangle, and that bunching the two brands together, there were still less than half the number of cattle in the hills that the graze would stand. And he was puzzled. Pride, land, wealth, greed—in cow country these things all boil down to one universal coin, the number of head of cattle a man runs under his own iron. Whatever old Benning planned for the Basin, he

planned it to swell his herds. Yet here was evidence that not only were Triangle herds pitifully thin, but the Benning iron was also scarce. And that was something to think about.

For a while Court wondered if the three smaller operators who had bought in the old railroad sections to the north were outlanders who had come in, using their purchase of the railroad sections as a blind under cover of which they could clean the marketable beef out of the Basin. But when he crossed through Benning's north boundary fence—as dilapidated and useless as the Triangle line above the ford at Mule Creek—he dismissed that guess. Throughout the wide and flat country where beef is the blood of the land, certain signs always mark the ranges of men who are starting out from small beginnings. The stock is always substandard, bought with the hope that it can be bred up in time. Fences may be tight, but often times they are strung with used wire and always they lack the taut, arrow-straight run strung by a practiced crew from a big spread.

The grass is usually a little overgrazed, too, in an effort to get the most from the little square of land its owner could afford to buy. And the brands are a little sloppy, indicating that the iron which applied them was hand-shaped and maybe awkward to use. Court saw all of these things as he came onto the old railroad sections. Just before noon, he dropped down to a shack on the first of the three sections. But no one was about.

He turned on north and west, crossed a ridge, and came down to a little meadow where a spring headed a tiny creek. A good peeled-pole corral and barn had been put up, and a house of hand-squared logs with dovetailed corners. A lot of effort had been spent on the house. There was a little patch of flowers in front of it and curtains at its windows. The yard in front of it was clean of rubble and the path to the front door was outlined with clean rocks from the bed of the little creek. There was a pole rack at the head of the path. Court swung down there.

When he had tethered his horse and looked up again, a man was coming out the path toward him. Court stepped under the rack and straightened up to wait. The man was a little younger than himself, more likely about Bob's age. He was slightly built, wiry, and walked with the quick, electric movements of an angry cat. He had level eyes, but their color was unstable, deepening and lightening with the thought passing behind them so that they made a man uneasy. Behind him, an older man was moving out from the house. He was about the same build of man and obviously the other's father. His face was grave and his eyes were strong and unwavering. But he walked on the balls of his feet with that same timber-cat way of keeping poised for a jump in any direction.

The two of them reminded Court

of a pair of bobcats trying to stay clear of hunters in a bear drive. The younger one spoke to him, first.

"I'm Larry Cole, stranger," he offered without welcome. "You looking for me?"

"Could be," Court agreed. His eyes touched the older man.

"Newt Cole," the older man said. "You've lit; won't you come on in?"

There was more friendliness in him. Court saw his son's eyes flash a warning to the older Cole. But the man only smiled a little. Court answered him.

"I won't be long," he said. "I heard down at the Benning ranch that you could tell me how Jeff Avis was killed."

The two men facing Court froze simultaneously. A color began to rise in the cheeks of the younger one. But Newt Cole held himself steady.

"Let me get this straight, stranger," he said. "You want to know *how* he was killed, or do you want to know *who* killed him?"

Young Larry Cole pushed forward, breaking in on his father.

"You Benning riders have had your warning from us. If Benning wants to know something, he can roll up here in his wheel chair and we'll tell him. You've got thirty seconds to hit your saddle!"

Court swung on the boy. "I'm no Benning rider!" he said sharply. "I'm Court Avis!"

"Court Avis!"

The words tore from Larry Cole's suddenly white lips. He rocked away from the man in front of him. His father had also grown suddenly grim and alertly defensive at the name of the man facing them. Court teetered, poised on his toes, watching. He thought the boy might make a stab for his gun. Then, from back at the house, where the whole conversation must have been easily audible, a voice rang out imperiously.

"Larry! Dad! Split up. I've got him!"

Newt Cole spun, jerking his hand up. "No! No, Les!"

But the smash of a heavy rifle at a window drowned his words. Court saw the smoke mushroom from the window. It came out in a little puff which appeared like magic. For an instant it hung motionless. Then it began to drift away on the light breeze. Court heard the crash of the big gun's charge and knew he was hit. But he didn't feel it. A vagrant thought slid through him, a thought that his name had ceased to be a moniker, but had become a death warrant. Then the yard tipped crazily. He put out his hand to catch the rack behind him, but missed. He was vaguely aware that Newt Cole had stepped forward, that quick, strong hands caught him as he fell. Then a black light, which had been smoking behind his eyes, exploded and he went out.

IV

It was midafternoon when Court roused. He could see the lowering sun out a window to the left of his bed. He sat up, then fell back sud-

dently, raising his hands to his head as though his fingers could lift away the hammer that started pounding on it when he moved. A bandage circled his head above his ears, and along one side, under the bandage, was a long burning place of hurt. Court fingered it gingerly, then lowered his hands. He knew what had happened, now. There had been another Cole left in the house, likely a brother to the touchy one who had come out front with the old man. Hearing his name had been some unaccountable signal. This unseen son in the house had dropped Court with a rifle. But instead of a hit, he'd gotten a crease.

"Dammit!" Court said with slow feeling. And he said it loudly. There was a stir in the far corner of the room. Court raised himself gingerly. A chair was tilted back against the wall, there. And a girl sat in the chair with a rifle across her lap. A girl in a gingham apron. A girl with warm freckles on her arms and tiny ones on her straight nose and a wide, generous mouth that twitched, now, with an effort to hide a smile. She spoke, after a moment, and with the sound Court could hear again the voice from the house which had preceded the shot that dropped him.

"Better take it easy, Court Avis," the soft, slow voice said.

Court grunted, part apology, part complaint at the hammering in his head, and part query. The girl's lips parted fully over her even teeth and a wry chuckle of amusement sounded in her throat.

"Dad says I've got to square with you," she said. "I'm Leslie Cole. It was me that cut you down, out front. Dad says I was hasty. Maybe I was. But it's come to a place in this country where talking's a lot safer after there's been a little powder burned. North of the barbed wire, Benning and Avis riders are fair game. I never stopped to think you wouldn't know that!"

Court nodded dully, trying to put together the various pieces of information which he had picked up and which had been scattered in his head by the impact of this girl's shot. She seemed to understand.

"You don't know anything about the Basin, now, do you?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Dad and John Makin and Ben Hibbs bought up the railroad sections up here two years ago. We moved in on one, Hibbs on another, Makin on the last. Not long afterward, your father, Jeff Avis, rode up here and complained he was losing cattle. He told us how he and Morgan Benning had been neighbors for thirty years, how you'd made a cripple of old Benning, and how a cripple couldn't steal stock, even if he had a mind to after that long a time. Your father didn't accuse us of rustling, but he gave us fair warning.

"A little later Benning's foreman, Jim Tebow, come along and claimed Benning was losing stock, too," Leslie continued. "Told us it'd have to quit or we'd be run out. Then we took to losing a good head now

and then and we couldn't afford it. Next spring things were pretty bad. We had a notion—we've still got it—that Avis hands or Benning hands were taking our stuff. About that time Jeff Avis came back and said he'd not look for trouble. He aimed to unstring his south boundary wire and run a heavy fence across the whole upper end of the Basin. So long as we stayed outside of that fence, we'd not be bothered. But he'd see any of our men found inside of it hung and in a hurry. That was all right with us. We made it stick both ways. Any Benning or Avis rider found on our side of the fence was a gone duck. And that's the way it's been, since. We've got us a few men. One night dad found a break in the fence. While he was cutting for sign around the break, he bumped into another man. The night was dark and they both reach for guns. Dad shot first. The other man's gun kicked dirt in his face. So it was a pretty close thing. The man was Jeff Avis.

"Dad found out the next day, from your brother, that Jeff had been doing the same thing he was—looking for sign—and dad was plenty cut up about it. He tried to tell your brother how the two of them could maybe work together and find out who was taking stolen cattle back and forth through the fence. But your brother wouldn't listen. He jerked a gun, pistol-whipped dad so bad he was in bed a month, and rode off."

The girl stopped and drew a tight-lipped breath.

"That's why, when I heard your name and saw the gun you were wearing, I figured you'd come to square with dad. That's why I shot at you. Now, you've heard the story. What do you intend to do, Court Avis?"

Court stared at the girl. He saw she was giving him an even chance. He saw she was genuinely sorry for what she had done. But he saw, also, that she was ready to do it all over again, and finally, if he offered any threat of violence toward her father. She was a quiet kind of a girl, small and trim, without the strong, prideful beauty of Morna Benning. But there was steel in her, too. He grinned a little.

"I'll take no chances bucking you, miss," he said wryly. "What do I aim to do? Why, I reckon I'll take your dad up on the offer he made my brother. I reckon I'll ride fence with him!"

A heavy sigh gusted out of Leslie Cole. She let the butt of her rifle slip quietly to the floor and stood the weapon up in the corner. Then she crossed to the bed and looked down at Court.

"Tomorrow, maybe," she said. "Not before. I made that gouge in the side of your head. It's up to me to heal it. Lie back down there. That bandage needs changing!"

In the next twenty-four hours Court had a chance to do a lot of thinking. Both Newt Cole and his son, Larry, were out on the barbed wire. Leslie told Court both men believed the time had come for a showdown. She said her father

believed that the rustlers—whoever they were—were about ready to raid the three small ranches on the railroad land at the upper end of the Basin and wipe them out. The reason for thinking this lay in the fact that the whole Basin was pretty well bled out of cattle. There wasn't much more stock worth taking. If the three small outfits were wiped out and rustling thereafter stopped, the rustlers would be perfectly covered.

Adding it together, Court could see why Benning had had a rider posted at Mule Creek ford when he came in. That rider was there to turn back any help either Bob Avis or the small ranchers might try to import. There was no doubt in Court's mind that Morgan Benning, crippled as he was, was still at the head of the whole deal. He had a notion that old Benning's helplessness had twisted his mind a little, and that his natural savagery and cunning had sired the whole scheme. If Benning could gather all the stock in the Basin together, then foment a war which would remove Bob Avis—and Court, now that he was back—and which would also wipe out the small operators, leaving the blame for the whole thing on them, the whole Basin would then belong to the Crossed-square. A little later Benning could bring the stolen stock, his own as well as that from the Triangle and the little upper spreads, back onto the range and no one would be the wiser.

Two or three things didn't fit, exactly. One of them was old Jeff. Court knew his father had been a stubborn man. But he wasn't sure that Jeff wouldn't have tumbled to what Morgan Benning was planning to do. It seemed a little odd to him that Jeff would accuse the little ranchers of the thievery without proof. But the building of the fence to avoid bloodshed was typical of the old man.

Another thing which was troublesome was the little scene Court had unintentionally witnessed between his brother and Morna Benning on the ledge in the little canyon above the Crossed-square. Bob wasn't a fool, nor was Morna. Neither one of them would believe they could plan anything between themselves which would go against the old man's wishes. Yet both must know what Benning planned, if he planned anything. And the fact that he had seen the two of them embracing troubled Court a great deal. It shook the positiveness of his hunch that Morgan Benning, from his wheel chair, was bringing about the doom of the long peace which had belonged to the Basin.

A last thing was a barb in his thinking, too. He couldn't get over Morna Benning's strange reaction when she identified him in the shadows of the smithy at the Crossed-square. She had undoubtedly heard the shots he had used to clear the window of her father's room for his escape. She had seen him running from the house. When he came up to her at the spot where he had left his horse, she had no way of knowing that he hadn't come back and finished the job he had so long ago

started on Morgan Benning. He knew from having been neighbor to the girl during the years in which they were growing up, that a vital part of Morna Benning's character was her headstrong loyalty to her blood, her family, and the ranch where she had been born. Yet she had deliberately saved him from the Crossed-square crew which was trailing him across the ranch yard.

She hadn't meant him to escape her. He knew that. She had meant to turn the crew away, then come back and talk to him. He had disappointed her by not waiting for her to come back. But the fact she had acted to save him at all puzzled him deeply.

Once or twice Court thought of talking to Leslie Cole about some of this, hoping that out of her knowledge of the new things which had come into the Basin, she could help him. But each time he checked himself. It was growing plainer that there was a three-way feeling of enmity and bitter rivalry in the Basin. It flowed equally from the little bunch north of the across-basin fence, from the dilapidated headquarters of the Triangle where his brother was boss, and from the den of the old wolf on the Crossed-square.

At sundown the two Cole men came back to the neat little cabin beside the spring. Leslie saw them coming and met them at the corral. She talked for several minutes. Finally she started back to the house with her father, while her brother went off toward the barn, evidently in a bad humor. Newt Cole came into the front of the house, clearly pleased that Court felt good enough to quit his bed, put on his boots, and come out to the fire. The old man drew up a chair beside him and sat down.

"Les tells me you and her have had a talk. I'm glad to hear that, Avis," he said earnestly. "I'm even more pleased to hear you aim to throw in with me and Hibbs and John Makin. We're in a tough spot, here. But we don't aim to let go.

"All three of us put everything we've got into this land and what stock we could buy for it. We're all of us too old to make a new beginning somewhere else. So we've got to fight!"

"How many men you got?"

Newt spread his hand unhappily. "We've had four hired riders killed since this all started. We can't get any more. There's John and Hibbs and Larry, and now, you. But we're not waiting any more. I seen Hibbs and John today. They've got about a hundred and fifty head of mixed stuff off all three of our places bunched half a mile north of the stiff fence your dad put in. There's sign about the other side of the fence that riders have been up along there. Chances are whoever's doing the raiding has seen that little bunch. It's pretty good bait. We aim to go out there tonight and tomorrow night and keep out there till they make a stab for them cattle. We aim to carry every gun we can pack and cut us as big a tally as we can.

Maybe we can't get 'em all, but we'll get enough to see where they're coming from. And that'll be a step the right way!"

Court nodded agreement. It was a good beginning. He said so and Newt Cole seemed pleased at his approval. The old man brightened and talked considerably at supper. But Larry sat across the table from Court, his eyes sullen with distrust. A little after seven Newt stood up and reached down to touch his gun belt.

"We got four miles to ride," he suggested.

Court liked the other two small ranchers who gathered with the Coles. John Makin was a tall, spare man with an habitually sour face and bright, laughing little eyes. Court knew the kind. Many like him came up out of Texas. Dour men, by appearance, but peerless partners. Ben Hibbs was a Kentuckian, short, round and heavy. He looked like a little county judge, but his roundness concealed thick, powerful muscles and his mildness covered a volcanic nature. Both of these men took Court on Newt Cole's measurement. Neither of them made any reference to the fact that he was old Jeff Avis' son or that he was Bob's brother. He was, to them, just a rider who had ridden Cole's way and had thrown in with them.

As they rode out of the little coulee where they had met and dropped down toward the flats that headed the Basin, Court had his first chance to study the fence Jeff Avis had built across the north end of the valley. It was five-strand, pulled tautly across posts set a rod apart. Court had never seen so solid a fence. It was like the man who had built it—much more firm than necessary. The upper Basin men had their little herd of cattle milled into a tight circle in the mouth of a little draw about a quarter mile back from the fence.

Ben Hibbs went down to the herd, worked its loose edges in a little closer, and lounged in the saddle with the time-honored ease of a night guard. Newt Cole and Makin tethered their horses out of sight of the fence and crawled behind the natural breastworks of the coulee bank just below the herd's position. Larry Cole was sent up to the edge of a ridge a quarter of a mile away to stand guard and signal the approach of riders to the trap. Newt sent Court halfway with Larry and told him to hunker down in some rocks on the slope. From here, if things went badly, he could cover the retreat of the rest of them up the ridge. It was a well-planned layout. Its only weakness lay in the fewness of their numbers.

Court took his place in the rocks, played out his rifle, and eased back to wait. Higher up the ridge, Larry lost himself among the rocks of the summit. The evening darkened slowly. A couple of hours passed. The moon came and brought fresh light. But the Basin was dead. Once Court edged up the slope to Larry Cole's position, but was gruffly turned away by the kid.

Midnight came, drifted past. Court began to feel the loss of sleep which goes with a long ride. He began to doubt, too, if the little, carefully gathered herd below was sufficient bait to draw out rustlers who were gambling for the whole Basin. He wondered if the waiting game wasn't about done, if the rustling, as such, wasn't over with. He wondered if it wasn't about time for the big play, in which the raiders would ride for men, not cattle!

This thought was still in his mind when he heard Larry's startled cry of alarm. His eyes cut along the fence and saw no movement. Turning to look back up the ridge, he saw two men outlined against the sky, leaping in where Larry crouched. As he raised his rifle, he was aware of two more shadowy figures streaking down the slope toward the ambush waiting beside the fence.

The stock of his rifle came solidly against Court's cheek and he triggered with a smooth calmness. Every shot he put home now would mean a dead man who could be identified and would bring him a step closer to solving the tangled muddle of violence which lay over his old home range!

V

The men on the crest of the ridge were clearly outlined from Court's position. His first shot caught one of them dead center, dropping him like an axed steer. The other one, tangled with Larry Cole, made a bad target. But Court had a chance for an angle shot when Larry was momentarily free, and took it. The raider yelped and started down the slope on a rough-gaited run. Larry leaped after him.

Court plowed out of his shelter, then, and raced off quartering across the slope toward John Makin, at the herd. Four men were circling in on Makin and the rancher was caught between their centering fire. A moment before Court was in range, one of the riders whipped in close to where Makin was fighting to get into his saddle, and fired a hand gun. Makin stretched upright, wheeled, and fell flat. Court flung himself flat, leveled his rifle, and emptied the magazine with a steady rhythm. He took one of the raiders clean from his seat and he thought he hit another. At the same instant Makin struggled to his feet and fired up almost into the face of another.

At the ambush. Newt Cole had left fat Ben Hibbs in the rocks to hold off the third group of raiders bearing in there, and was running swiftly across toward Makin. Hibbs' gun slammed determinedly but there were five or six men in the party facing him, and he couldn't handle all of them. A man piled out of his saddle, went to his knees, and sighted carefully at Newt Cole's running figure. Court slid to a stop and swung his sights. But the man got his shot off quickly. Newt Cole went down, plowing through the grass on his face.

Court fired, keeling the man on his knees into a folded shadow. He

tried for another in the loping knot of riders which had been boring in toward the ambush. But they wheeled and shied off. Larry Cole came charging on down the slope like a madman toward the spot where his father had fallen. John Makin was back in his saddle, riding gingerly, but bending in toward the fence. It was over much as it had begun, swiftly and without warning. The raiders hit the foot of a transverse ridge, jumped it, and vanished. Court walked on down, reaching the place where Newt Cole had fallen almost at the same time as the rest of them. Ben Hibbs rolled the fallen man over.

Court needed only one look at the great wound in the man's chest where the bullet had come out to know that the elder Cole was dead. Larry looked at his father's body with a kind of dazed helplessness. Court was afraid that the kid would fire his powder, that he'd blow up. But instead his father's death seemed to sober Larry's wildness. He said something strong and quiet under his breath. Only Court heard it.

"How am I going to tell Les?"

Court dropped a hand to Larry's shoulder. The boy looked at him without the hostility he had shown earlier. He seemed to understand what Court meant, and he seemed grateful for the sympathy. Ben Hibbs had turned his attention to Makin. The man had a hole through his thigh, high up. But it hadn't bitten very deeply, and his steady, monotonous swearing was from anger, rather than pain. Hibbs spread his hands.

"A fine mess this is!" he grunted. "We try to trap us maybe a lobo cow thief or two, and instead the whole damned pack jumps our necks. Let's see what we cut down. Anyways we'll know just what we're fightin' from now on!"

Makin slid out of his coat and tossed it over Newt Cole's body. Leaving Larry there, Hibbs, Makin and Court moved down to where two of the raiders lay sprawled a few yards apart. Hibbs rolled the men over, identified them as riders from Benning's Crossed-square. Court nodded. He had known who they'd be. They turned, then, and went up the slope to where Court had tagged the pair which had jumped Larry's look-out. Hibbs rolled over the man who had fallen there, bent, and straightened with a sharp oath. John Makin stopped awkwardly and echoed the oath. Both men turned troubled eyes on Court. Finally Makin spoke.

"Newt Cole told me that you were cut square and had a steady head. Had to be, the way you took the truth of how it was Newt had killed your dad by that mutual accident along the fence. Newt figured you was a good man, Avis. He was mighty glad you tossed in with us. So'm I, after the way you cut these boys down tonight! But it ain't fair to ask too much of a man. It was enough you'd take Newt's story of Jeff's death, face value. We ain't going to ask you to out and ride

against your brother, now! Pull out of the Basin, boy. We'll forget you've ever been here!"

Court frowned and looked at the dead man.

"Triangle?" he breathed tautly.

Makin nodded. —"Sim Leming. Been ramrod for the Avis spread for three years, now. Bob Avis must have been in the bunch we drove off!"

Court shook his head unwillingly. He remembered again how he had seen Bob and Morgan Benning's daughter on the ledge in the little canyon back of the Crossed-square. Morna Benning was a strong girl, strong enough to use her beauty to bend a stout man, even to make a fool and a renegade of him. Court knew. He had seen promise of that strength in Morna, even five years ago. He hadn't feared it, then. There was no violence in the Basin. But hell was loose, now. And Bob was little more than a kid. He was weak. They were bitter thoughts for Court Avis.

"It's pretty plain," Hibbs said slowly. "The kid's gone bad. He ain't held the Triangle together like old Jeff did. Likely he figgers if he could get the whole Basin under his iron, things'd look up some. With old Benning crippled up and the girl kind of soft on him, your brother's been able to hire off some Benning riders to salt his own crew. He's kept it dark, probably running the stuff he's lifted out'n the Basin down into the rough country below Mule Creek. If he could starve us out, or gun us out; if he could bankrupt the Crossed-square and then marry the girl, he'd have the whole shebang!"

Makin scuffed a work boot toe into the sod.

"I figgered he was a nice kid, in his way. Maybe he didn't plow very deep, but a fair neighbor for any man. It's hard to believe!"

Ben Hibbs turned and started down the slope where Larry Cole was lashing his father's body across a saddle.

"Sure," the fat man said heavily, "it's hard to believe. It's hard to believe Newt Cole is dead, too. It'll be hard for that gal at Newt's house to believe it. But damn it, facts is facts. You and me, John, and young Larry, has got a chore cut out for us. We've got to get back to Newt's place—it's the stoutest—and hole ourselves in. Young Avis and his gunnies'll be back soon to wind up the job they couldn't quite do, here. We've got to be ready for 'em."

They came up to where Court's horse was tied. Hibbs shoved out his hand.

"I'm sorry, son," he said quietly. "I hear you come a long ways back to this place. The Basin treated you rough five years ago. And it's treated you rough again. I'm mighty sorry about that!"

Court didn't take the man's hand.

"I'm not pulling out again!" he said flatly. "I punched a cap five years ago to kill an ornery snake. I didn't quite make it. Before I leave the Basin again, all of my work will be done. Now, we'll not

hole up at Cole's. Those wolves will expect us to do that. We'll not wait for them. We'll ride first. And we'll hit first. We'll hit for keeps. Triangle or Crossed-square, we'll sweep her clean!"

Ben Hibbs dropped his hand.

"You're a hard man, Avis!" he said.

Court grinned thinly.

"I'm a fool!" he said softly. Hibbs didn't understand. He shook his head as Court swung up to leather.

It didn't make any difference whether Hibbs understood or not. Court knew. He was playing his hunch. He was playing the gamble that the obese madman in a wheel chair at the Crossed-square was the he-devil of the Basin's war. He was playing it clear out—even to agreeing to ride against the man who was both his brother and the last of his blood. If he was wrong— But he couldn't be!

When the little cavalcade from the north end of the Basin raised to saddle in the yard of the Cole place a little before dawn, all of them turned instinctively toward Court Avis for orders. It was, in its way, as strong a compliment as a man may receive from his fellows. Court understood that these men felt that he was an outsider. He was pleased that they'd take his leadership in spite of this fact. He realized there was no way to make them understand that it was they, themselves, who were the newcomers to the Basin.

There was no way to let them know that he had his own scores to pay off. Although the bullet which had killed his father had come from Newt Cole's gun, it had been the devils raising hell with the peace of the valley which had actually caused Jeff's death. Old Jeff, righteous and earnest, would never have come to a place where he'd try to pull a gun on another man beside a boundary fence if his hope of a gentleman's peace in his valley was not entirely dead. And if Jeff Avis hadn't tried to pull a gun there beside the fence in deep night shadows, Newt Cole would never have shot him.

It was Court's job, then, with or without the understanding of the others, to find the he-coon of the Basin's trouble, and square Jeff Avis' account with him. He ran his eye across each of the riders who were bunched around him. Beside the three men with whom he had ridden out by the fence, there was another. Court put steel to his mount and edged the little group, meaning to ride up beside Leslie Cole and order her back to the house. Larry rode against Court, stopping him and leaned out of his saddle so that his voice wouldn't carry.

"Leave her be!" he begged. "She made no ruckus when we carried dad into the house, but she's hurt. Dad raised Les to be as much of a man as me. Let her have her part of it, Avis. I'll watch her. I'll see she keeps clear!"

The boy's plea was so earnest that Court eased up. He thought of Newt Cole's body, lying in a back room of the house. Not a good

thing to leave a sensitive girl like Les for company. He echoed to himself Larry's promise to keep Leslie clear of trouble. His frown drew a little deeper, too. Shorthanded as they were, the presence of the girl lessened even more the effectiveness of his little striking force. But he couldn't order her out. He wheeled his horse again. And when he next looked in the girl's direction, he had his reward in the look on her face.

Leslie's eyes were moist with gratitude and relief, and her full lips were pulled taut in a flat expression of determination. He saw the gleaming stock of a small rifle upthrust from its boot under her leg. The look and the gun were matched.

The thought struck him that it was possible that Leslie Cole would be less of a hindrance than he thought —that they had gained another recruit, and a dangerous one, when she joined them. He circled around to a place between Ben Hibbs and Makin.

"You boys look at this one way," he told them. "I see it another. I don't know and you don't know who's right. We'll give your hunch first trial. Head for the Triangle!"

As the little troop lined out, Court settled grimly to leather. He didn't believe that Bob was heading the renegade combine against which they now rode. But he wasn't sure. And until he knew beyond doubt, he wouldn't ride easy. It was for this reason that he named the Triangle the first stop.

Time dragged. Court's palms softened with the uneasy sweat which clung to them. He held a little apart, riding with his head hunched a little forward and his face stony. As the rises drifted under them, leveling as they rode into the fullness of the open Basin, a tension built up in him. If there were a lot of lathered horses in the corral at the home ranch, if there were men with wounds and uncleaned guns, if there were any of a dozen unmistakable signs, then he was going to be a party to the execution of his own brother. There was no leniency in Ben Hibbs or Makin or either of the Coles.

It was this uncertainty and impatience which drove Court a little ahead of the others. And therefore it was Court who first saw the red blossom far across the grass. A blossom which grew swiftly from a faint spark to a great blaze. He drew up sharply. The others slid up about him.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" Ben Hibbs gasped. "The crazy young fool fired his own ranch!"

Court stared a moment, driving his mind away from the fact that he was watching the destruction of the solid house which had been built to shelter him. He stabbed deep beneath this knowledge for facts, found them, and lined them out. They fitted in his mind. Raising in his stirrups, he swung his hand down sharply to the eastward.

"To the Benning place—and burn leather!"

The wolf pack was in at the kill. But maybe they'd not be too late!

VI

The main buildings of the Crossed-square were fully lighted when Court's little party rode into it. Court didn't like the look of the situation and held Hibbs and Makin and the two Coles back a little. The men grumbled, but Leslie Cole edged over beside Court and sat her horse quietly. Impatient and uneasy, they were bunched in the shadow of a willow thicket on the little creek which drained the Crossed-square's yard.

Suddenly, from across the Basin and a little south of the track they had made in their own crossing, hoof thunder beat up. Court edged his party deeper into the shadows and grunted at everyone to lean forward and hold the nostrils of their mounts. The oncoming troop passed within a dozen yards of where they waited. Court counted them carefully. Eight men. This was the crew which had ridden out to fire the Triangle. Court swore to himself. He wished he could fit Bob into the pattern. It was all complete, save for Bob and Morna Benning. That troubled Court. It was a sure bet that Bob Avis wouldn't sit calmly by and watch the burning of his own home. But where was he, then? With Morgan Benning's daughter? Or had the destruction of the Triangle included the killing of Bob?

The party from across the Basin hammered on into the Crossed-square yard, flung down, and unsaddled with rough humor passing from man to man. They were patently pleased with the night's work. From the porch of the main house, Morgan Benning's thin voice squealed out a summons to one of the riders. The man laughed and started up toward the house. The rest split off toward the bunkhouse. Someone moved through both buildings, trimming down lights. In ten minutes there was no sign in the thinning dawn light that the Crossed-square had not spent a normal night. Court twisted around in his saddle toward Leslie Cole.

"You'll stay here," he told her quietly. "Get yourself down behind a rock and put a shot into every window where you can spot movement. The rest of us will squeeze down on the house and separate. We've got to make them think down there that we've collected a big crew somewhere. So when you do fire, fire fast and hard. And move around."

Leslie pulled the rifle from her scabbard and nodded solemnly. Larry frowned and looked uncertain. Ben Hibbs nodded at the boy.

"Avis is doing what he can, boy," the fat man said shortly. "We shouldn't have brought your sister with us. But she's here. And if we have to break away, she's far enough out here so she could hit saddle and get clear!"

Larry grunted. Court spread his fingers, bending one down for each man.

"Hibbs, you take the north. Makin, the east. Larry, the south. I'll go in against the west face. Don't try to break into the house.

Leave that up to me. Just keep low and put a quick hole in anything that moves!"

John Makin spat. "You go in that house, you won't come out again!" he warned.

Court laughed shortly. "If I don't, you better start riding, far and fast!" he retorted.

Ben Hibbs started his horse forward. Court nodded. The rest of them moved, fanning out from the willows. Court rode stiffly in his saddle, his eyes sweeping the wide arc of buildings before him. They were a little late. He had wanted to be set when the crew from the Triangle came back. And particularly he had wanted to hit before daylight. Now every passing moment increased visibility and he felt as though he rode in full daylight, cleanly outlined to every pair of eyes in Benning's stronghold.

The feeling passed, after a little, and he hunched lower in his saddle. He kept to the left, getting behind the cover of the corrals, and dismounted there. Just as he rounded the near corner of the poled stockade, a sudden burst of firing tore out from the house. Back at the willow clump on the flats he heard the thin, angry snap of Leslie Cole's gun as the girl started to fling lead at the windows from which the shooting at the house came. He swore, sharply. For a moment he thought that he or one of the other three from the upper end of the Basin had been sighted.

Then he realized the shots were all concentrated toward one spot in the yard. A second later a man vaulted a wagon and bent off toward Court's position at the corner of the corral, running with a drunken desperation. Dirt flung up about him and it seemed that every window in the west face of the house held a rifleman who was firing at the running man. The man seemed impervious to that screen of lead. He seemed charmed. He kept coming and in a couple of seconds, Court stabbed out a hand to jerk the runner around and fling him down behind the corner of the corral.

"Bob!" he jerked out. "Bob! What the devil?"

Bob Avis sat up slowly. Blood had run from a cut in his scalp down over his face and neck. There was a wet spot on one trouser leg where lead had tagged him as he ran. There was a wild, half-dazed look on his face. Court shook him roughly and Bob's eyes cleared a little.

"Blast you, Court," he said slowly, "why didn't you kill that old devil the day you cut him down!"

"Benning?"

Bob nodded. "He's crazy. He has been for years. Morna told me a long time ago. But helpless like he is and being her father, she wanted to keep it quiet. I tried to help her. I tried to cover up wherever I could, even when I knew he was having our place stolen blind. I figgered Morna and me could straighten that out after he was gone and we were married!"

Bob stopped and rubbed gingerly at the ugly cut in the top of his

head. Court waited impatiently. Bob still seemed half dazed and puzzled as to how to go on with the story he was telling.

"Morgan Benning's wild—plumb loco. Like an animal! I knew it'd make him worse if he discovered you'd come back. It did, Court. That's why I tried to run you out when you came in. I shouldn't have done that. If I'd squared you with the lay of things between us we could have saved the home place and there'd still be some chance for Morna and me!"

Court hooked his hand in the front of his brother's shirt and shook him again.

"Shoot it, kid!" he said sharply. "Shoot it and be quick. It isn't all done, yet!"

Bob clamped his head between his two hands. "Benning thinks the world's against him. He aims to whip the world. First, he aims to have every inch of the Basin. Then the county—then Satan only knows what. And he aims to have it permanently. He's ordered his hired gun packers to kill, fast, and often! That man hates everything. Even his own daughter. For a long time Morna and me let the old man think I was playing his own game. But there had to be an end to that. He had me slugged and locked in the spud cellar. He had Morna slugged, too. I don't know where he's had her taken. He ordered the Triangle burned. And tomorrow his whole crew was riding up to the barbed wire to collect all the stock Makin and Hibbs and Cole had been running. They were to take the stock and shoot everything on two legs, including Cole's girl, if she got in their way.

"His crew would do it, too. He's got a bounty up for heads. The gent that slugged me got a hundred bucks for turning in my gun. There's a thousand on your head. Get *me* a horse, Court. We've got to get out of here!"

Court straightened. "My horse is back of those shadows. Take it if you want it. If you don't you'll find a rifle in the scabbard. I'm going into the house. I'd feel a sight better if *I* had an Avis gun covering me as *I* went!"

Bob shook his head dully and crawled off in the darkness. Court pulled his hand gun, set it back to full cock, and sprinted from his shelter, full at the far corner of the house. He held this course until someone at a window sighted him and opened fire. He veered abruptly then, heading toward the nearest corner.

He made it before the riflemen could change their sights. He ran under the muzzle of a rifle jutting out over his head from a window in the north wall, hooked his hands over the sill of the next opening, and rose in a swinging leap full into the face of another guard. A startled bleat puffed the man's lips out but the sound died as Court's boots hit him. He went down heavily. Court snagged up the man's belt gun for a reserve, dove across the

room, and on into the spacious central hall.

Two men were at its upper end. They turned toward him, one ducking and one standing straight as they swung their weapons. He hit them both without conscious attention to his shooting, and ran a dozen paces in the other direction toward the doorway he remembered as the one opening into Morgan Benning's room.

The guard who had been outside this door was missing, now, probably at one of the outer windows. He hit the door with the point of his shoulder, stove it in, and stood facing Morgan Benning. Outside, while Bob was telling him about the man, Court had been puzzled. Bob seemed in mortal fear of Benning. Court could understand how an insane paralytic victim could plan the hell which had struck the Basin. But he hadn't been able to see how a helpless man could manage to direct a big ranch crew or enforce his despotic will from a wheel chair.

As he burst into Benning's room, his puzzlement vanished. Looking into the man's eyes, he saw Benning was not insane. Clever, inhuman in his methods—these things, certainly. But not insane. For the flame in Benning's eyes was familiar to a man who rode with cattle on those frontiers of grass where law had not yet come. It was the flaming desire of one man for the possessions and wealth of his neighbors. Nothing more.

This Court saw. But he saw something else—something which struck him like a vicious physical blow even as he cursed himself for not having long ago guessed it. Morgan Benning was no paralytic. The effects of Court's bullet had long ago worn off. He stood on two firmly planted feet, a gun level in his hands and a cold, anticipatory smile on his face.

"The last card, Court Avis," he said quietly. "A bullet through your belly. You'll die in three days and there'll be no one left in the Basin to buck me!"

Court saw his finger tightening. He knew Benning would shoot, as quietly and calmly as he had spoken. He had only the fleeting fraction of an instant, too little for a lunge. So he did what he could. He swiveled at the hips, a swift, loose-jointed shift of his body's weight. It jerked his torso a few inches to one side, just as Benning's weapon fired. The slug didn't center Court's belly as had been intended. It caught him above the groin, snapping one leg out from under him. He staggered, caught at the back of a chair, and fired his own weapon. He saw the bullet hit Morgan Benning over the chest. Benning's gun lowered a little and his fingers didn't tighten again on the trigger. But aside from that, he gave no sign whatsoever of hurt.

"Your brother's locked up, Avis," he said slowly. "They'll kill him before you can get to him. Your ranch is burned. Your friends from the barbed wire will ticket out under my boys' guns. Go ahead and

kill me, Avis, but you'll find you've lost, anyway!"

Agony was grinding up from Court's own wound. Waves of blackness swept across him. In the distance, though he knew it was barely outside the house, firing grew in intensity. But the only thing he could think of was the satanic old man who stood before him. He eared back the hammer of his gun and fired again. Morgan Benning's body shook. A pallor spread over the man's face. Little bubbles formed on his lips as they shaped mocking words once more. But he stayed on his feet.

"You couldn't kill me before, Avis. And you can't do it now, you know!"

Something seemed to snap in Court. This man had defamed his own daughter five years ago, he had stolen from friends and neighbors. He had pretended helplessness even in his own house in order to gain power and land. He had imprisoned the man who loved his daughter and had mistreated the girl, herself. Here was evil—lurid, powerful and inhuman.

Benning's mockery, his imperviousness to hurt, fanned a sudden flame in Court Avis. Emptying his own gun, Court raised the one he had taken from the guard. In his ears was the rising sound of bitter fire, seemingly in the house itself, now. But Court drowned it out with the reckless barrage which he put down against the spraddle-legged figure still looming in the darkness that was squeezing down on him.

It was midmorning when Court roused. He saw he was in the master's room at the Crossed-square. Involuntarily, he turned his head toward the spot where he had last seen Morgan Benning, as though he expected to find the mocking figure still standing there. Ben Hibbs was in a chair beside the couch where Court lay. He saw the shifting glance and shook his head, his eyes somber.

"You finished him, son," he said softly. "You finished him complete! The man was like a cat. He had five holes in him, but he was still alive when we cleaned out the last window and broke in here."

Relief came over Court. He had never feared Benning, save after that first shot had failed to drop him. And in his fear, even then, he had not been able to see the master of the Crossed-square as a man but rather as a voracious blight which lay over the Basin. It was good to know that the blight was gone forever.

A movement across the room caught Court's attention. John Makin stood there with Bob Avis, with Morna Benning, with Newt Cole's two youngsters. They had a paper over which they were bent. Curiosity stabbed at Court. He tried to sit up a little. Ben Hibbs turned toward the others in the room and chuckled.

"He's frettin' already," he grinned. "Better show him. If you don't,

he'll change it all again when he's on his feet!"

The group in the corner came across together. Bob had the paper. He smoothed it down beside his brother. Court saw it was a rough map of the Basin. New boundaries had been run in. The old Crossed-square was marked with the names of Bob and Morna. Court looked up and saw his brother watching him with troubled eyes. He realized what was bothering the boy. It was that linking of names. Five years ago Morna's name would have been with Court's. A slow smile crossed Court's face as he looked at his brother.

Bob's lips parted in wide relief. Court's eyes dropped back to the map. Along the barbed-wire boundary, built by Jeff Avis to stop drifting beef and to separate the old ranches of the Basin from the new ones he distrusted, there were many changes. Crossed-square and Triangle had both been trimmed some. Three nice spreads lay across the old barbed-wire fence, marked with the names of Hibbs, John Makin, and Larry Cole. There was no marking on the rest of the Basin. And the names of Court and Leslie Cole were missing from the picture.

He twisted and looked up at the girl. In the background he saw the faces of the rest of them—people who wanted to be neighbors and friends, who wanted a time of peace and prosperity in the Basin. There was suspense in those faces, a waiting for his reaction. He knew that they had planned this together. And there was no annoyance in him for their meddling. He grinned up at Leslie Cole and saw an answering light begin to glow in her deep, velvety eyes.

"They figure they've railroaded us, girl," he said softly. He put his finger down on the map, tracing the unapportioned acreage. "But they've been stung. We've got the best land!"

Morna Benning took up the map and entered the last two names on it. But the motion was no longer important. Court had forgotten the map. Leslie Cole sat quietly down on the edge of the couch and was telling him without words and with forgetfulness of the others in the room that the healing of the raw scars of violence in the Basin would take no longer than the building of a new house on the Triangle. Court understood the look and its wordless message and he reached out his hand to one of hers.

Court Avis had ridden north from New Mexico with a spare box of shells, just as Bert Walsh had warned him to do. The shells were spent and men were dead. But there was peace in the Basin. When the seasons changed again, Court hoped Walsh would travel through Wyoming. There'd be a new house on the Triangle, and a new wife. And there'd be plenty of fat Basin cattle for Bert Walsh to buy.

THE END

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BRAND OF THE ZERO KID

By Eli Colter

"Leave the Kid alone; I know what makes him tick," claimed Shorty Hahn, but did he know that hair-triggered buscadero intended to wipe out an old grudge with gun smoke?

I

WHEN Jess Doolittle, foreman of Bill Deerhorn's ranch, heard the ruckus down by the horse corral, he looked at Joe Rivers and shook his head and sighed. "Looks like Zero's at it again, Joe."

The Deerhorn bronc buster grinned ruefully and nodded, and the two of them moved around the corner of the bunkhouse where they could get a better view. They stood watching and Doolittle's deep-set eyes were troubled. This was getting to be an old story on the Deerhorn spread. The Zero Kid had tried to knock Shorty Hahn's block off at least a dozen times in the last six months. Always the result was the same. Shorty Hahn was a hefty man; he outweighed the Zero Kid by a good twenty-five pounds.

At first, Shorty had been puzzled by the Kid's belligerence, and he'd given the Kid as good as he sent and let it go at that. But lately Shorty had grown a trifle annoyed by the Kid's unexplainable determination to whip him in a fist fight, and he had taken to rocking the Kid back on his heels without compunction. He did that now. He laid it on without mercy until the Kid had all he could take. Then he calmly settled back to wait until the Kid got his

second wind, or decided he'd had enough. Only this time the Kid seemed to be too mad to have any sense. He waded right back into it.

"Maybe we better mosey over there, Joe," Doolittle said finally. "What the devil has got into that fool Kid, anyway? What's he got against Shorty Hahn? Shorty's as good a man as ever forked a bronc."

Rivers nodded. "I know. It's one too many for me, Jess."

As the two men approached the corral, they heard the Kid howling in fury: "Dang you, Shorty! I'll stomp your guts loose if it takes me a hunnerd years!"

Doolittle frowned. Beyond the untempered rage in the Kid's voice, he didn't know that this particular fracas was much different from all the other rows that had taken place between the Kid and Shorty Hahn. But the Zero Kid's unflagging and persistent enmity toward Shorty was beginning to bother the foreman. He eyed the Kid intently as he and Joe Rivers neared the battling cowhands. Zero was still a kid for all his six feet of height and tough frame. Right now, because he was so mad he couldn't see, he was wasting all his best efforts on the calm, unruffled Shorty Hahn. Shorty simply kept away from the Kid's wild rushes and laid it on plenty whenever the Kid gave him an opening.

Within thirty seconds from the time Doolittle and Rivers came within speaking distance, the Zero Kid ducked his head and charged, yowling like a wildcat. Which was exactly what Shorty had been waiting for. He side-stepped, and came up with a thundering right uppercut that caught the Kid flush on the button and laid him on his back, where he lay glaring up at Shorty, shaking his red head and spitting blood.

Shorty was above middle height, but his great breadth of shoulder and depth of chest made him appear inches shy of his five feet and ten. Shorty knew that Doolittle and Rivers had come up and halted a few feet away, but he didn't look at them. He stood there gazing down at the Kid expressionlessly.

"Zero," Shorty said dispassionately, "you're a plumb, unmitigated fool. It ain't me that licks you, it's that crazy temper of yours. You get so het up that you ain't got no sense. When you going to grow up?"

Doolittle's frown deepened as he stood there by Joe Rivers, watching the Kid shake the cobwebs out of his head. It was a crying shame, Doolittle told himself, that the Zero Kid had taken such a violent dislike to Shorty Hahn. Shorty was the best friend the lonely Kid had in the world, if the Kid only knew it; but the hot-headed young fool wouldn't believe it if it was told to him by the Apostle Paul. Neither would the Kid believe it if Doolittle were to tell him that he had kept his job on the Deerhorn spread only because of Shorty Hahn's intercession. Doolittle didn't like having an atmosphere of real downright hatred, between any of the boys, and he had known long ago that this was no

mere boyish peeve on the part of the Kid. It troubled him the more because he couldn't see any reason for it. Shorty was as ace-high a gent as had ever come to the Deerhorn outfit. But every time Doolittle had decided to fire the Kid and put an end to this continual battling, Shorty had talked him out of it.

Doolittle couldn't see any reason for that, either. He figured if anybody kept tying into him the way the Kid did with Shorty, he'd get dang sick of it, and mighty quick. He bent his puzzled frown intently on the Kid, as the Kid pulled himself together and got to his feet. The Zero Kid was still mad as hops, but he knew he'd had enough for one day. He glared at Shorty Hahn, ignored Doolittle and Rivers, and struck off toward the bunkhouse.

None of the three men watching him said a word till the Kid was beyond hearing, then Doolittle glanced at Hahn and asked with open impatience: "What do you let him git away with it for, Shorty?"

"Yeah, why don't you really get in and knock the tar out of him for once, give him a whaling within an inch of his life?" Rivers said. "Then maybe he'll let you alone."

Shorty stared after the furious, departing Kid. There was a tone of admiration, even a hint of pride, in his voice as he answered. "There, gents, is a kid that has more guts than the law ought to allow. Trouble is, I'm afraid you're right, Joe; I'm beginning to think he's the kind of maverick that has to be half killed before there's any sense beaten into his chuckle head. Me, now, I'm sort of built along the lines of a dray horse. The Kid's built like a cat, and he'll be as quick as a cat and as hard to beat if he ever gets a hold on himself."

Doolittle didn't say anything for a minute. He stood there frowning at Shorty and thinking hard. He'd give a good deal to know just what was the mystery about the Zero Kid. He probably had a name and folks somewhere, but nobody had ever heard him peep about either. He had drifted in to the Deerhorn spread four years ago, like a tumbleweed in a dust devil, a lanky brat dressed in bib overalls, barefoot and with hayseeds in his thatch of red hair from sleeping in somebody's haystack. He wouldn't tell who he was or where he came from. It was Joe Rivers who had dubbed him the Zero Kid.

The boy hadn't known one end of a bronc from the other, and he knew less about cow raising, but he caught on fast. As a matter of fact, the Zero Kid had proved particularly apt in learning about everything, except the most important thing of all. He had the blazing temper that went with his red hair in about twice the ordinary ratio, but even the regular smackings he had taken at the hands of Shorty Hahn hadn't succeeded in teaching him to control it.

Doolittle shook his head and his voice was sharp with irritation. "Hang it, Shorty, I'm goin' to get so dang fed up with this here busi-

ness some day that I'll fire that kid the minute your back's turned."

Shorty returned the foreman's gaze levelly. "Suits me if it suits you, Jess. But when you fire Zero you fire Shorty Hahn in the same breath. There's nothin' the matter with the Kid. There's good stuff in him and he's smart. He just needs a little educatin'. But I ain't arguin' with you about him any more. Any time you say the word, me'n' the Kid'll hit the breeze."

Doolittle glared in helpless exasperation. "You go to the devil, will you? Educatin' my hind foot! Joe's right. What that fool kid needs it to be licked till he can't git up off the ground. And if you don't do it—"

Sudden veiled fire burned in Shorty's dark-gray eyes. "Hands off, Jess. I can lick the two of you with one hand tied behind me. You mind your own business and leave the Kid to me."

Doolittle said slowly: "What's that loco kid to you, Shorty? What can he be to you, that you'll take so much dirt off him and keep your eye on him like a hen with one chick?"

The fire died out of Shorty, and his gray eyes turned bleak. "That's my business. I know what makes him tick. Just keep your nose out of my affairs and leave the Kid to me."

II

That settled it so far as Jess Doolittle was concerned. He kept his nose out, but he kept his eyes open, too. It was, more than curiosity where Doolittle was concerned, more than a foreman's natural desire to hang onto a top hand whose equal you didn't find running loose on the range every day of the week. He had a strong personal liking for Shorty Hahn. There was almost as much mystery concerning Shorty's past as there was about the Zero Kid's. Doolittle had often wondered what it was. He wondered if one of them was the answer to the other. There didn't seem any immediate likelihood of his finding out.

For a time there was no perceptible change in the order of things on the Deerhorn. The Zero Kid continued to wade into Shorty and get a good pasting for his pains, without blunting the edge of his wild temper and without dulling the blazing spirit in him. Also, he ignored Shorty's caustic assurance that he'd never be worth a hill of beans until he learned to sling the gear on that temper of his and ride it to a standstill. He put on a few more pounds and learned to hit a little harder, but he was still the wild-tempered fool he had been ever since that day a year ago now when he had suddenly conceived that terrific hatred for Shorty Hahn and tied into him with all fours.

Or; Doolittle wondered, had the hate really been there all the time, with the Kid holding it in till he got big enough to try to whale Shorty? The foreman was still wondering uneasily about the whole business when the carload of Nevada mustangs was shipped in to the ranch that early fall. Among the-

lot of horses was one magnificent gray stallion that stood out like a show horse, well over seventeen hands high and clean-cut as a racer. How a horse like that ever got in among that run-of-the-range shipment of nags, was the first thing every hand on the Deerhorn asked himself.

"It's a mistake, that's all," Doolittle said. "He must have got in with the bunch, and it was so dang much trouble to cut him out they just let it go. I'll bet he's ornery as all get out."

Joe Rivers eyed the big gray warily. "I'll take it out of him, if he is. He sure has got a rollin' eye."

But nobody eyed the gray stallion with the hungry look that was in the Zero Kid's face. If ever a man fell in love with a horse, the Kid fell in love with the gray, and Joe Rivers saw it, though he didn't say anything. Shorty Hahn saw it, too, but he didn't say anything either.

After the horses were driven to the ranch, and Bill Deerhorn, the owner of the spread, came out to give them a look-see, there was a little talk about the big gray. Deerhorn nodded appreciation of the stallion's good points, and said lightly: "He looks mild enough on the surface, but wait till you boys try him once. Me, I don't need him none. The feller that rides him can have him."

Of course, Joe Rivers, being the regular bronc buster, got the first try. To his surprise, the gray horse seemed gentle as a kitten. He led to a hackamore like a pet. He didn't even make any fuss when they threw the gear on him. But the minute Joe Rivers' pants pockets touched saddle leather on the gray's back, the stallion was transformed into a fighting demon. He knew all the tricks and he invented a few twists of his own. Joe Rivers stuck aboard for two full minutes before the gray sent him sailing through the air.

Joe tried it three times, then he said in disgust: "Anybody else can have my share. Go to it, you buckaroos. Anybody want to guess now why he happened to be in that lot of knot heads?"

The other boys tried it a time or two, in turn, and decided that Joe had the right idea, while the Zero Kid sat on the corral fence watching with that hungry look in his eye. Shorty Hahn said he had a good-enough string; he didn't believe he wanted the sunfishing fool at any price. That made it the Kid's turn, he being the junior hand in the crew.

He slid down off the fence and stalked over to the gray horse that stood there looking mild as a summer breeze, and heaved himself into the saddle. The first jump the Kid lost his hat. The second jump he lost his temper. The third jump he lost his seat, and landed in a sprawling heap, cursing the gray's ancestry and swearing by his favorite oath that he'd ride the hellion if it took him a hundred years. He tried it for six days in succession, till he was so bruised and sore from the punishment that he had to take a rest.

Then Jake O'Leary made his appearance on the Deerhorn spread.

Jake O'Leary was, on the face of it, two things: he was a crack horse breaker and a tough hombre. He was built along the lines of Shorty Hahn and looked almost as though he might have been Shorty's brother; but there the resemblance ceased. O'Leary seemed to be in his late twenties, but he had drunk too much hard liquor and it had begun to show its effect on him. He wore two six-guns on crossed belts, and hinted broadly that he knew how to use them. He swaggered and boasted and said that he was a dangerous man to cross.

But he could get a lot of work done, and Bill Deerhorn was willing to give him a chance. Deerhorn said he didn't think Jake would last very long, though, because he certainly wasn't going to take anything off him. The rest of the boys didn't have much use for him. Shorty Hahn didn't like him at all and made no bones of the fact.

But the Zero Kid took to Jake like a duck takes to water. Joe Rivers said, with a disgusted scowl: "That idjit of a Zero likes Jake just because Shorty don't." But there was more to it than that, and Jess Doolittle had his fingers crossed.

The ranch was something like a powder keg, but things slid along for a while, everybody expecting a blow-up any minute. Jake was working some young stuff in the corral, giving Joe Rivers a needed layoff, and the rest of the hands were out combing the range with the boss. The big gray stallion was taking it easy in a separate corral, still bucking the Kid off every time the Kid tried to ride him, and Bill Deerhorn had given orders that it was strictly hands off the gray till the Kid admitted he was licked.

What happened that day was never quite clear, although a man could do some fair guesswork. Jake was down at the corral working his nags. The rest of the men were out with the boss. Deerhorn sent Shorty back to the ranch building on some errand. Shorty didn't come back, and when the men rode in that evening they found Jake O'Leary hammered to a bloody pulp and Shorty dusting off his knuckles, so to speak. Shorty never talked, and nobody asked any questions.

But Bill Deerhorn told Jess Doolittle to fire Jake off the ranch bag and baggage, and Jake went, muttering threats of revenge.

There were a couple of bloody slashes on the gray stallion's left hip near the flank, but no spur had ever made them, and whatever had been used to rip the gray's hide wasn't lying around for anybody to find. Everybody took one guess as to what had happened, and figured that Jake had it coming to him.

Everybody but the Zero Kid. His hate for Shorty Hahn seemed to boil higher than ever. Jess Doolittle caught the Kid glaring at Shorty and muttering to himself: "I'll kill that so and so. I'll kill him!"

Doolittle's temper snapped then. "Shut your face! Dang it, why

Shorty stands up for you is more than I can understand. Cut out that kind of talk or I'll push your face in."

The Kid shut up. And the following Saturday was pay day on the Deerhorn.

III

The whole Deerhorn crew went in to Red Bluff on a toot. In a body, the boys headed for the Antler Saloon to play a little stud and put down a few drinks, and chin a while with the other ranchers and cowhands from the surrounding territory.

But the Zero Kid slipped away and made for the Silver Palace. The Silver Palace was at the other end of town. It was at the other end of the scale, too. It was a hang-out for road agents and horse thieves, and it was no place for a hothead like the Zero Kid. The Kid felt a little uneasy when he stalked into the dingy smoky room and bellied up to the bar. To cover his uncertainty, he looked around with a scowl and ordered a drink of whiskey.

Jake O'Leary got up from a table at the rear of the room and came swaggering along the bar toward the Kid. O'Leary still had a few fresh scars and bumps and assorted bruises from the punching Shorty Hahn had given him, but he grinned ingratiatingly at the Kid and came to a halt at his side.

"I begun to think you wasn't comin', Kid. Glad you got here."

The Kid swallowed his whiskey, nervously, at one big gulp. "We was late gettin' started. Where we gonna go so we can talk?"

Jake gestured with his head. "Oh, just come along back here to the table, Kid. Nobody'll pay any attention to us. Have another drink with me. Then we'll slide back there where we can be to ourselves."

The Kid accepted the drink, and they took a quart back to the table with them. Once they were settled at the table, Jake gave the Kid a slightly belligerent and inquiring scrutiny.

"Well, what's it all about, Zero?" he demanded bluntly. "Let's get the cards on the table. When I come to the Deerborn spread, you shined up to me like a long-lost brother. Why?"

The Kid stared him down, sullen and simmering with anger. "I thought maybe you could lick Shorty, I told you that. If I ain't never goin' to be able to do it, I got to see somebody else do it. I got to see him licked till he can't stand."

O'Leary shook his head, scowling and puzzled. "Well, that's a rum one. That beats anything I ever heard tell of. I tried to lick him, when I caught him beatin' your horse with that stake. But even I got sense enough to know when I run into a buzz saw. I ain't askin' for any more. You'll have to get somebody else to wallop Hahn for you. Was that all you wanted to see me about tonight?"

The Kid nodded. "Yeah. I thought maybe, if I gave you the

low-down, you'd change your mind and take another sock at him. What was he beatin' the horse for?"

O'Leary raised his heavy brows in surprise. "Why, I thought you'd of guessed that. Shorty tried to ride the gray, and the bronc piled him. I tried to give Hahn what was coming to him, but he had me faded four ways from the jack. What you got agin' him, anyway? What you got to see him licked for?"

The Zero Kid's face was cold. His voice was colder. "Listen," he said. "Six years ago we had a purty place, my dad and my kid brother and me. My mother had been dead for two years, but we'd got to be happy there again, us three. My brother was too little to do much yet; he was only eight, four years younger than me. But dad and me got along swell and little Gene helped."

"Where was this?" O'Leary interrupted.

The Zero Kid frowned. "No matter. Off over the hills. Then a guy that had it in for my dad got a gang together and raided our place. See? We tried to fight, but what was the use? They was too many for us. They burned the buildings, and run off the stock, they killed my dad and little Gene, and they thought they'd killed me. But I laid doggo, and after they was gone I crawled away, and I wasn't too bad hurt to get over it. A lady in a ranchhouse took care of me. I worked there a while, then I struck out."

"What for?" demanded O'Leary. "Why didn't you stay where you had a good spot?"

The Zero Kid's cold eyes burned. "I went to the sheriff. That guy that headed the gang: I had to get 'em all, but I had to get him sure, if it took me a hunnerd years."

"What did he have it in for your dad for?"

"Because my dad shot his brother for rustlin', that's why. I went to the sheriff, like I said, and him and me got together, and he went after the gang. He got 'em all but the rustler's brother. That feller got clean away and kept goin'. And I took out after him."

"Did you remember what he looked like?" O'Leary cut in.

"Just his general looks. I never got a good sight of his face. But I had somethin' to go by, that my dad told me before he died. This feller looks plenty tough on the outside, see, and he is tough. But inside, he's yeller. There's one thing he's afraid of. He's scared blue of the fists of the man that can lick him. You get him licked fair, once, and he'll spill anything he knows before he'll let you hit him again."

"So that's it!" O'Leary said. "You follered him to the Deerhorn ranch?"

"I follered his general trail," the Kid corrected, "and caught up with him on the Deerhorn. But what could a kid of fourteen do? I was fourteen by the time I located him on the Deerhorn. I had to wait till I was big enough to lick him and make him talk."

O'Leary scowled. "I don't get it. Sounds like moonshine to me. If

you know he's the one, what's the sense of makin' him talk? Put a slug through him and call it a day."

"But that's just it," explained the Zero Kid patiently. "I don't *know*. He's got all the looks of the guy, except for his face that I never did see good. He's called Shorty, and he's plenty tough. It don't fool me none his gettin' a job on the Deerhorn and layin' low like a regular cowhand; it's just what a slick guy like him would do. But I got to be sure. He could be another Shorty, and just happen to look like the guy that killed my dad. If I ever killed the wrong man, I'd never be able to look myself in he face again. So—I got to lick him and make him talk."

O'Leary scowled, and filled the Kid's glass. "Have another drink, and maybe you'll be able to see clear." He glanced at the Kid's waist. "Where's your gun? I never seen you with a gun."

The Zero Kid looked a little sheepish. "The boss won't let me wear one. He's afraid I'm liable to fly off the handle and hurt somebody. Why?"

O'Leary didn't answer. He sat silent for a minute, scowling absentmindedly around the dingy room, at the hard-case men at the tables and bar. He watched from the corner of his eye as the Kid downed the stiff drink, then poured another. The Kid's eyes were beginning to look faintly bleary.

O'Leary said slowly, as if he were voicing a matter he had been giving considerable thought: "That's all bull, Kid. The boss don't know what you got agin' Shorty, or he wouldn't say that."

The Kid drank again, and shook his head. "No. Sure he don't know. I never told anybody. I never told anybody at all, but you, and I ain't goin' to tell anybody. I'm just tellin' you so you'll help me get Shorty where he'll talk, and we can make him own up. Maybe I never will get fast enough to lick him."

"Look, Kid," O'Leary said quietly, "you're just wastin' a lot of time. In your heart you plumb know he's the one, don't you?"

The Kid nodded slowly. "Yeah. I know. There can't be no mistake. He had the nerve to come down to the yard to make sure we was all dead, after the rest of the gang rid off with the stock. I didn't dare open my eyes when he bent down to look me over, but when he went on to look at dad and little Gene, I did open my eyes and I ain't never going to forget him, even if I only seen his back."

"He's got a mark?"

"He has," said the Kid. "He's got a wide jagged scar on the back of his head low to the neck, and no hair grows on it. Ain't you seen the scar on the back of Shorty Hahn's head? I guess there just *might* be two scars on different men like that, but I don't believe it. Sure, I'm sure. Somebody nigh cracked that hombre's head open with a gun barrel, one day. Maybe you're right, Jake. Maybe I'm a fool, waitin' to make him talk so I'll hear him say

he done it, when I plumb know that Shorty Hahn is the guy I saw there with the gang that day."

"Sure, you're a fool," snapped O'Leary. "You ain't just makin' excuses, are you? Your ain't yeller, too, are you? Damn it, if any man'd done that to me, I'd fill him full of lead the minute I had a chance. Wait for him to talk! Hell! Ain't you got no guts?"

The Zero Kid glared. "Don't talk to me about guts! I got as much guts as the next one. I'm just mad enough"—and drunk enough, added O'Leary mentally—"right now, if I had a gun on me, I'd mosey right down there to the Antler and let Shorty have it, and get it over."

"That's easy fixed, Zero." O'Leary pulled his right-hand gun and handed it to the Kid, butt first. "Go git him. Funny you didn't turn him over to the sheriff long ago, though."

The Zero Kid reached for the gun. "Well, the sheriff give out that he'd got the whole gang, you see. He figured Shorty thought the sheriff believed the whole gang was killed off, then Shorty'd think he was safe. He'd lay low for a while, and show up, and the sheriff could nab him. But Shorty laid low too good. I knowed I could beat it to the sheriff if Shorty ever tried to run out, and I wanted to git him myself."

"Well, here's your chance," said O'Leary. "Your chance to show you got a little sand, and your chance to git even with a yeller belly that killed your folks. Go git him, then hit for the timber till the fuss blows over. Nobody'll ever blame you none for crossin' off a score like that."

"Yeah. I'll git him." The Kid's drink-bleared eyes gazed down at the gun he gripped in his hand. His drink-inflamed bad temper roared through him, crowding out every other thought. He only knew one purpose: go get the man who had killed his father and little Gene. Walk in and shoot him down without compunction. Go get him.

The Zero Kid turned from the table, and stalked out of the Silver Palace, gripping the gun in tense fingers, his hate-crazed eyes staring straight ahead.

IV

Jake waited till the swing doors had closed behind the Zero Kid. Then he poured another glass of whiskey, drank it and set the empty glass down on the table with a thump, and got to his feet.

A big hefty man with hard black eyes and a short black beard, who stood leaning against the wall a few feet away, addressed Jake tersely: "Quite a yarn the Kid spins. Anything in it?"

"Sure. It's all true. Every word of it. Have one on me, Blacky." Jake shoved bottle and glass across the table. "Only, the Kid sort of got his dates muffed a little."

"Yeah?" Blacky moved up to the table and reached for the bottle. "Wasn't it Shorty Hahn he seen there with the gang that day?"

"Oh, it was Shorty Hahn, all right." Jake waited till Blacky re-

leased the bottle, picked it up and drank from the neck of it, and set it down again. "But, look, Blacky. The Kid says the old man told him this stuff, but the old man was dead by the time Shorty got there. So the old man didn't have much time to talk, he must've been mighty nigh dead already, and likely he didn't talk too clear and straight."

"Reckon that's so," agreed Blacky.

"No two ways about it." Jake eyed the bottle as Blacky reached for it again. "Which explains why the Kid didn't get it straight. You see, Blacky, it ain't Shorty that turns yeller and spills his guts when he gits the daylights pasted out of him. That was the one the old man killed, Shorty's brother. The Kid or anybody else could lick Shorty within an inch of his life and Shorty'd never let a peep out of him. But the Kid knows dang well it *was* Shorty there with the gang, so he might as well hang it on him."

"You seem to know a lot about it, Jake," Blacky said dryly.

Jake leered. "Why shouldn't I? I was one of the gang. The only one that got away. I watched Shorty go down there and look 'em over to be sure they was all dead, and I stayed right where I was till Shorty went on after the gang. Before I moved, I seen the Kid sit up, so I knowed he wasn't likely hurt too bad. Then I lit out, in the opposite direction from the one the gang took. The sheriff don't know I was ever with the gang. He honestly thinks he got 'em all but Shorty."

There was a puzzled frown on Blacky's hard face. "But, listen. Then Shorty must've knowed you when you showed up at the Deerhorn."

Jake laughed and reached for the bottle. "Sure, he knowed me. And I knew him. Well enough to know if I handed him the glassy stare and pretended I never seen him before, he wouldn't give me away. He sure must've got a jolt, though, seein' me roll in when he'd been thinkin' I was dead for years. But he kept his mouth shut, and contented himself with watchin' me like a hawk. He don't like me no better'n I like him."

"And the Kid wouldn't know you of course," said Blacky.

"Shucks, no! He never got no look at me that day. He's got no way of knowin' I was one of the gang. I hope to gosh he gets Shorty the first shot. I owe that guy one, for beatin' me up like that. I'm still sore all over."

"What did he tie into you for?" demanded Blacky.

"Oh, I thought I'd have a whirl at that gray nag while nobody was around, and I couldn't even get the gear on him. He tried to kick a hole in me, and I went after him with a club. Shorty rode up when I wasn't lookin' for him, and we sure had 'er out, only I got the raw end of it. I hope the Kid fills him so full of lead he'll sink. Come over to the bar and we'll get another bottle."

The Zero Kid tramped steadily down the wooden sidewalk toward the Antler Saloon. His angry eyes

stared straight ahead. He kept telling himself that Jake was dead right. He'd been a fool for a long time, waiting till he was big enough to lick Shorty and make him confess before he polished him off. He *did* know it was Shorty Hahn there with the gang that day; there wasn't any real doubt in his mind at all. So what was he waiting for?

By the time he reached the Antler, and turned in, the gun gripped tight and ready, the Kid didn't care much what happened so long as he got Shorty Hahn. He wasn't the best shot in the world, but this was one time he must not miss. When he stepped into the Antler, somebody at the bar glanced at him, and a swift mutter of alarm went down the bar and around the room. Half the men present turned to look at the Kid.

Shorty didn't turn. Shorty was standing there at the bar with his back toward the Kid, and he saw the Kid in the mirror behind the bar. Shorty set down his glass and stood still.

"I'm goin' to blow your brains out, you dirty killer!" the Kid snarled at him. "Turn around. I wouldn't even shoot a skunk like you in the back."

Shorty didn't turn. He eyed the Kid intently in the mirror. He could see that the Kid was plenty drunk, his face flushed, his body swaying. Yet, drunk or sober, the Kid wasn't so bad a shot that he could miss at this range. Over beyond and in back of the Kid, Shorty could see Joe Rivers. The bronc buster was already edging toward the Kid. Shorty figured if he could keep the Kid's attention focused on him, in a few seconds Rivers would be near enough to grab the Kid's arms.

"Sure, I'll turn around, Zero," Shorty said quietly. "But you ain't exactly hankerin' to become a murderer, are you?"

"Who the devil are you to object to a little thing like murder?" snarled the Kid.

Shorty's face looked tired. "O.K., Zero. Have it your own way. But I'll take just one more drink first, if you don't mind." He picked up the whiskey bottle before him on the bar and poured the drink. Then he suddenly slammed the bottle toward the wall at the far end of the room. There was a gasp of surprise, because nobody was there for Shorty to throw the bottle at. But in the mirror Shorty could see Zero's astonished gaze follow the bottle.

Joe Rivers saw the Kid's gaze swerve, and he leaped forward and flung his arms around the Kid's body and heaved.

Shorty whirled and dashed to the center of the room where Joe and the Kid were struggling, but not before the Kid had succeeded in blasting two wild slugs through the roof. Reaching down, Shorty wrenched the six-gun from the Kid's grip, and Joe Rivers backed away to let the two settle it between themselves.

The gun was just a gun; there wasn't anything about it to proclaim its ownership. Shorty scruti-

nized it swiftly, then looked at the glowering Kid.

"Where'd you git this smoke wagon?" Shorty demanded.

The Kid stared at him, white with fury. "None of your business. I can git another where I got that one, too."

Shorty's sudden anger faded. He looked weary and a little pale, but his voice was patient. "You'll get no more guns, Zero. You'll go get your nag and come on home with me, that's what you'll do."

"Go to blazes!" the Kid flared. "I ain't goin' nowhere with you."

"If you need any help, just say the word, Shorty," Joe Rivers said quietly.

Shorty didn't take his eyes off the Kid. "Thanks, Joe. I can handle him." He said to the Kid: "Are you going to pull in your horns and come along, or do I have to make you?"

"You and who else?" the Kid demanded truculently.

Shorty sighed, transferred the gun to his left hand, and swung with the right. He brought one up from the floor that landed flush and stretched the Kid on his back. Joe Rivers backed a step, but nobody else moved. Turning, Shorty walked over to the bar and laid the six-gun down on the mahogany.

"I don't suppose you know who belongs to this shootin' iron, do you, Sudsy?" Shorty asked the bartender.

The man shook his head emphatically. "I reckon not, Shorty."

"O.K. When you find out, give it back to him. You might ask Jake O'Leary if he ever saw it before."

The barman nodded, but he didn't speak. Shorty went back to the senseless Kid, picked him up and threw him over his shoulder. Then without a word or a look for anyone else, he carried the Kid out to the hitching rack and tied him on his own horse. Leading the horse, he started down the street looking for the Kid's mount. He didn't do much looking until he got to the Silver Palace. And all he did then was to get on the Kid's horse and strike for home, still leading his own horse with the Kid tied in the saddle.

IV

When the Kid regained consciousness, he found himself looking at Shorty's back. They were almost home. The Kid wondered if there had been any run-in between Shorty and Jake when Shorty stopped by the Silver Palace to pick up the Kid's horse, but he didn't ask. He made a tremendous effort to repress the cold fury sweeping him and do a little thinking.

If he could have looked back into the Silver Palace, where Jake and Blacky were hunched over a table deep in lowered conversation, an empty whiskey bottle and a full one between them, the Kid would have known a little more about what the score was. For Blacky was saying:

"I guess you're right; it's the smart thing to stay put right here, but I'd've sure wanted to see what hap-

pened over to the Antler if I was in your place."

"We'll find out sooner or later," O'Leary said dryly. "It's dead sure somethin' happened. The Kid didn't take his horse with him, but the nag's gone now. Don't you ever peep that the gun he had was mine. I've got another in my bedroll. I'll stick it in my empty holster and nobody'll ever know the difference. Whatever happened, that's small potatoes. We got other fish to fry, Blacky."

Blacky frowned, uneasy and dubious. "You sure Shorty won't never peep, Jake?"

Jake laughed. "Him? Shucks, no! He was one of the gang himself, wasn't he? If the sheriff ever got wise to that he'd grab Shorty, wouldn't he? Not on your life, Shorty won't peep. He's just playin' smart, Blacky: layin' low till he's dead sure it's safe to move. And there's just one good reason why he ain't ducked long before: he ain't hangin' round innocentlike, posin' as a common cowhand on the Deerhorn because he likes it, you know."

"And that reason is the Kid?" Blacky said shrewdly.

"Right, the Kid. Shorty couldn't have been on the Deerhorn more'n a year or so before the Kid showed up. He knows dang well the Kid has got him spotted, and he don't dare beat it till he's free of the Kid. He's playin' a slick game, playin' wet nurse to the Kid and pullin' the wool over everybody's eyes, and he's just smart enough to git away with it, if somebody don't stop his clock for him."

"You followed him to the Deerhorn?" Blacky put in.

"Nope." Jake took a drink from the bottle. "I got a slick scheme for livin' easy, but it keeps me movin'. It just happened that the Deerhorn was sort of in my line of march, as you might say, so I stopped off there. If Shorty and me hadn't got in a mix-up, I'd be there yet. But it don't hurt my scheme none. Only, I got to take care of Shorty and the Kid before I move on, see?"

"Sure, you got to, for your own safety," agreed Blacky. "I ain't that dumb. If you don't, you might run into Shorty anywhere again, and this time he might fool you and open his yap."

Jake winked. "You said it. So, I got to egg the Kid on to blast Shorty, then the Kid'll get pulled for that, and I'm in the clear. If the Kid gets cold feet, I'll git him in a corner and tell him I seen Shorty there that day too, tell him I just happened to be in that neck of the woods and heard the shootin' and rode over to see what it was all about."

"Yeah, and you could say that you thought him and his folks was all dead, which is why you didn't stop; and you was plumb het up over such goin's on, so you tried to ketch up with the gang and they got away from you," suggested Blacky.

"Thunder, you *ain't* so dumb,

Blacky. O. K., so that's the ticket if I have to pull it."

"And the Kid'll believe it all the more because Shorty was so hostile and give you such a pastin'," Blacky went on. "You could say that Shorty got a look at you that day when you was chasin' the gang."

"O. K., O. K.!" said O'Leary impatiently. "That's all worked out. Drop the subject. We got to do a little plannin'. I told you I got a scheme that's foolproof. I ought to know. I been workin' it ever since I ditched the gang, and ain't been caught yet. I'm willin' to take you in, and your pal, Skinny Tobin. But no more. That was another thing I learned from bein' in Shorty's gang. The fewer you got, the safer you are. So us three it is, and no more."

"That's all right by me," Blacky answered. "Spill the scheme."

"It's just this." Jake took another drink, set the bottle down, and leaned toward Blacky, brisk and businesslike. "I ride into a place where I ain't known. I git a job on a ranch bustin' broncs for a while, till I'm sort of knowed around as a hand on that spread. Then I look around and spot a good band of nags that'll bring money. I pick up a pal or two that can be trusted to take their split and beat it and keep their yaps shut. When I'm ready to roll, me'n my pals pick up the nags some night when I'm supposed to be in town for a toot."

"Man, that *is* slick," said Blacky admiringly.

"I told you it was. And before anyone gits wise that either me or the horses is gone, I've got clean away, and sold the broncs for a good price, split with my pals and hit the trail by my lonesome. Just one good haul, and beat it. And I ain't got tripped up yet. But look, Blacky: the one important thing is, I always pull it where there's already been horse stealin' and cattle stealin' goin' on, which everybody knows can't have been done by me. And the lot I git away with is laid to the ones already doin' the dirty work in that neck of the woods. *And* I hear they been bothered on this range with a little horse stealin' for the last year."

Blacky grinned. "Which you found out afore you stopped at the Deerhorn, eh?"

"Feller, you ain't lyin'. So there it is, and all we got to do is lay low for a while and act awful innocent till a few more horses and cows is stole, and we got such perfect proof we ain't been near the range that we're above suspicion. Then we pick our skates and roll."

But the Kid couldn't hear that conversation, so he had no way of knowing what was being cooked up for him and Shorty Hahn. As a matter of fact, he wasn't thinking of Jake O'Leary, anyway. He was thinking only of Shorty, and of what a fool he'd been, waiting to make Shorty talk, when he really knew so well in his heart that there could be no mistake, that Shorty Hahn was certainly the man he had seen bending over his father's body only a few minutes after his father had died. Jake had guessed accurately

just how the Kid came to get the two brothers mixed, and believe it was Shorty who was the one to talk when he was whipped, instead of the brother his father had shot, but the Kid couldn't know that, either. From his father's stumbling dying speech it had seemed that he meant Shorty. The Kid couldn't know that the old man had been so near death that he hardly knew himself what he was saying.

All the Kid could know was what seemed to be, on the surface of things, and nothing had occurred as yet to hint that his reasoning was leading him astray from the truth. He could figure only from the appearance of things, and he was trying hard to do that now, but it suddenly occurred to him that he was too all-fired mad to think straight. And he sat up straight, slightly wide-eyed, staring at Shorty's back. For the first time it was driven home to the Kid that there was hard cold truth in what Shorty had tried to tell him a hundred times: his own lack of self-control was defeating him every time he tried to even the score.

For the first time the Zero Kid began to take stock of himself. And he felt slightly ashamed that he had been acting so much like a brainless kid instead of like a man. The Kid was not a fool; once he saw a thing clearly, it didn't have to be pounded into him a second time. Sitting there on Shorty's horse, staring at Shorty's back, the Zero Kid made the first big decision of his life. He was done flying off the handle and acting like a harebrained fool; he was done letting his bitter determination for revenge drive him into a wild fury that got him nowhere.

From now on, the Zero Kid was going to work on himself, until he could see where he was going and hold himself in, no matter how mad he got. The next time he traded punches with Shorty Hahn, it was going to be a different story. And he would start with the big gray stallion. Shorty Hahn had a surprise coming.

Shorty did, there was no mistake about that. The rest of the Deerhorn crew made a dead set to punish the Kid for his attack on Shorty. They spoke to him only when they had to, and acted otherwise as if he wasn't on the ranch. Only Shorty treated him the same as ever. The Kid didn't care much. He was pursuing a real purpose, now, and he was one of those people who don't do things by halves. He set himself to work on the gray horse with such studied control that everybody felt a faint sense of surprise, watching from the side lines.

Naturally, he didn't top the gray stallion in ten minutes, and he didn't cinch the bit on his temper and bitterness in a day. But he made steady, dogged progress from then on. Every once in a while he heard comment among the men of the crew concerning the increasing depredations of the horse thieves infesting the hills, but he gave it little heed. But the Kid did top the gray stallion with record speed, at that, and he topped himself, too; and the day that

he rode the spirited horse around the ranch buildings and across the fields and back, without the stallion making a move to fish for the sun or buck his rider to kingdom come, was a proud day for the Zero Kid.

He knew that Shorty had been watching the whole process lynx-eyed; he knew that the other hands had been watching too and had come more or less to forgive him for his past recklessness and render him some respect for what he had accomplished. They showed in their speech and their attitude just how they felt. What the Kid did not know was that Blacky and Jake O'Leary were keeping an eye on the proceedings, too, keeping warily to cover and avoiding detection.

Then it was that Jake decided it was time to move, and blow the whole business wide open.

VI

Jake and Blacky had carefully chosen the band of good saddle horses that would bring them the biggest haul. They had got together with Skinny Tobin and made their plans for the theft and the getaway. Jake summed it tersely:

"We might as well kill three birds with one stone. We'll lay the trap to clean Shorty and the Kid too, and nobody'll ever dream we had a hand in it."

"How?" demanded Skinny Tobin. "Lay 'em all on the table, Jake, so we don't misfire and run into no snags."

O'Leary grinned evilly. "Well, I sure can do it without hurtin' my conscience none. I never turned a gun on no man. I've done my bit of owlhoot ridin' and lived easy, but I don't have no more use for a killer than any man what's honest at heart. And the smoothest slickest killer I ever seen was and is Shorty Hahn. Still, I don't want no part in really doin' the act of finishin' him. I once took my oath that I'd never kill no man, and I ain't breakin' it now. So we lay the ground so the Kid'll take care of Shorty and leave us in the clear."

"For gosh sake, don't talk so much," snapped Blacky. "You got a plan—out with it."

O'Leary nodded, unruffled by Blacky's impatience. "O. K., feller. Here it is. Next time the Deerhorn crew comes into town for a toot, which won't be long 'cause it's nigh pay day now, I get the Kid aside. I tell him I got positive proof that Shorty is up to his old tricks, layin' low on a convenient ranch, headin' a gang of horse thieves and takin' his split. I tell the Kid I don't care to get mixed up in it, and for him to keep still about me, I'm only puttin' him wise for his own good. See?"

"So far, so good," agreed Skinny Tobin. "Go on."

"O. K. Then I tell him I got private information that Shorty and his gang are plannin' to make one last good haul and blow—*and* they're goin' to git his gray stallion in the haul."

"Hey, hey!" Blacky cut in. "That'll make the Kid so mad—"

"Shut up!" snarled Jake. "I'm

runnin' this show, and I know what I'm doin'. Close your trap and listen to what I'm tellin' you. This is foolproof! Of course the Kid'll be mad. We've got to make him so mad that we *know* he'll fall in with the scheme and we won't miss."

"But you ain't really goin' to take the gray, are you?" Skinny protested.

"Will you shut up and listen?" O'Leary grated. "Or do I cut you out of this?" Tobin subsided, and O'Leary went on swiftly. "Now, what I tell the Kid is this: Shorty will have his gang take the nags off and sell 'em, but he'll lay low there on the Deerhorn as innocent as pie, and wait for his split. The Kid will know when to move, when he wakes up some mornin' and the gray stallion is gone from his pasture. He won't say nothin' to Shorty, but he'll hit for the sheriff's office and tell the sheriff to come git Shorty."

Blacky blinked. "Well, I'll be hanged! If that ain't nerve. Your side of it, I mean. If only the Kid ain't so mad he goes off his bean—"

O'Leary's eyes narrowed. "Listen! Ain't the Kid plumb proud of how he's licked his temper and learned to keep his head? And he's got brains enough to see that this is the prime time to do that very thing and settle the score for good and all. He'll do just what I tell him, don't worry! He'll hike for the sheriff, and swear that Shorty headed the gang that killed his old man, and that Shorty headed this gang that stole the horses from the Deerhorn, the gray included. And Shorty'll hang, and the Kid'll be all right. I ain't got nothin' against the Kid. I'd rather see it this way than see the Kid git hurt."

"You're overshootin' your mark," growled Skinny. "If you think the Kid won't go r'arin right after that gray nag, you're nuts."

"I ain't nuts, and the Kid won't chase the gray," snapped O'Leary. "I tell you this is foolproof. I'm goin' to tell the Kid the truth—Well, most of it anyway. I'm goin' to tell him I was with the gang that day, that I turned over a new leaf and ain't done no owlhootin' since, that I'll back him up and swear to the sheriff what I know about it. The sheriff is a pretty good old egg. He makes it his brag that he'd rather see a man go straight than put a noose around his neck. He won't do nothin' to me."

"That's risky," Blacky protested.

"Like blazes it is," retorted O'Leary. "What've I got to be afraid of? I never killed anyone, and nobody can prove I done any stealin' the last few years. I'll be in the clear. And you guys will go on with the herd, sell 'em off, lay low with the cash and wait for me."

"Oh, I see!" said Skinny. "That's different. But I'm still afraid the Kid'll come after the gray horse."

"Look," said O'Leary. "Even that part of it's foolproof. I tell the Kid to hit for the sheriff the day after he finds the nag gone. I tell him I'm goin' after the gang and bring his horse back. And I'm really bringin' the nag back, too. You guys git the gray, turn him over to me, and beat it with the other horses.

I lay low for a while, till the Kid and the sheriff show up at the Deerhorn, then I ride in with the gray. I tell him and the sheriff you was too many for me, I barely managed to git the gray and git out with a whole hide. I tell him you went in the opposite direction to which you did go. Then after they've all cut off to track you down in the way you didn't go, I quietly light out to meet up with you, we split the coin, and keep goin'."

Blacky drew a sigh of relief. "Yeah. Solid. Foolproof and watertight. I got to admit it. What about us stickin' together after we make our gitaway, Jake? I reckon I'd like to tie up permanent with a gent that's got the brains you have."

"We'll see about that," answered O'Leary evasively. "Right now, the next move is to get the Kid primed, and snake the big gray out of his pasture. Keep mum and lay low. It won't be long now."

The next night, when the Zero Kid headed home from town for the Deerhorn ranch after talking to Jake O'Leary, he was thinking as he had never thought before. He felt a vast sense of relief that, thanks to Jake's shrewd brain, the whole wearying business was working out so smoothly, at last. The Kid wasn't hankering to become a murderer. If he and Jake hadn't both been so drunk that night they wouldn't have tried to pull such a fool stunt. But he, the Kid, was a little older, and much wiser, now; it was far better to handle it Jake's way, turn Shorty over to the sheriff red-handed, and clean the slate.

With Jake to add his testimony about being there that day and seeing Shorty with his gang, the sheriff would ask no further proof, no matter how much Shorty denied his guilt. And the sheriff wouldn't blame Jake for his past minor depredations, any more than the Kid himself did; a fellow always had a right to turn over a new leaf and be forgiven, so long as he wasn't a killer.

But, the Kid told himself, he'd go just a step further than that. He'd really catch Shorty redhanded, and have that much more to tell the sheriff. When he reached the ranch that night, he didn't go to bed in the bunkhouse. Nor did he care what the other cowhands of the crew might think. They'd mind their own business and let him alone, even though they might be curious about what he was up to.

So he went quietly out to the corral, saddled his little sorrel, and rode off to the pasture where he kept the gray stallion most of the time. There he hid the sorrel, and cached himself in the brush near the pasture gate, and begun his vigil. He kept watch for three nights before anything happened.

Then, on the fourth night, shortly after the moon came up, he saw two men approach the gate, enter the pasture, rope the gray and come out with him. He suppressed a gasp of surprise. In the light of the moon he could get a good look at their faces; they were that Skinny Tobin and Blacky Shultz he had seen with

Jake a time or two. So that was where Jake had got his information about Shorty's shady activities. As the men rode past the Kid's hiding place and started up the slope to the ridge beyond, he got to his feet. He'd just fork his nag and trail 'em till they met Shorty.

Then he heard a sound that brought him up rigid, unbelieving. He heard Shorty's voice behind him, saying lightly:

"Wait up for uncle, Kid. I've got Joe Rivers and Jess Doolittle here. We been getting curious about what you were doin' nights and we've kept a watch on you. How'd you get word that the horse thieves were workin' over this way, Kid?"

The Kid turned slowly, narrowed gaze focused on Shorty, and on Joe Rivers and Jess Doolittle.

The Kid's temper burned through him like a searing fire, but he was holding himself in, and he was thinking fast and hard again. Something was phony, somewhere. Shorty Hahn wouldn't bring Joe Rivers and the foreman of the ranch with him if he was on a horse raid; not even Shorty would dare do that. He wouldn't last two minutes if Joe and Jess caught him in any crooked work. There was only one answer. Shorty didn't have anything to do with this theft of the gray stallion. Then who did? Had Skinny and Blacky lied when they told Jake that Shorty was in it? The Kid felt a little sense of bewilderment. Maybe Jake O'Leary wasn't the only one who had turned over a new leaf.

Only, did a man who was a killer have a right to be forgiven, no matter how straight he lived afterward? And did he, the Kid, have any right to answer that question? Wasn't there Somebody higher up who would take care of those sort of things, if you gave Him a chance to see that justice was done? All of which went through the Kid's mind with lightning speed as he stood there staring at Shorty Hahn. Then the Kid answered slowly:

"Jake O'Leary told me. They tried to ring him in on it, and he told 'em to go to hell, and slipped me the low-down on the quiet. There's somethin' fishy about this that I don't get. Let's follow 'em till they pick up the other horses."

"All right, Kid," Shorty said quietly. "This is your show. Sort of a game of follow the leader, I guess, and you're the leader. Get your nag."

By that time the two men leading the gray had got well up the slope, but they were still in sight, and it was an easy matter to keep them in sight. Pursued and pursuers continued on that grimly quiet ride for over two miles, before anyone else showed up on the scene. Then in a little dry swale, surrounded by thick forest cover, they came upon a third man waiting calmly in the small clearing.

The Kid held up a hand and muttered a low word of warning, but Shorty and Jess and Joe Rivers had already caught sight of the man waiting, and the four of them came to a halt and sat their saddles in silence,

watching. They were not close enough to determine the identity of the third man, nor to hear the words of the three when Blacky and Skinny Tobin came up to the fellow waiting in the clearing. The three horse thieves remained there for a few seconds, talking; then Skinny turned the gray horse over to the third man, and Skinny and Blacky started to ride away.

The third man, who had taken over custody of the stallion, called after them a terse warning. "Make it snappy, you two! Get the skates and don't stop till you reach the hideout. Then don't make another move till I show up."

"Keep your shirt on, Jake," Blacky said curtly. "We ain't goin' to make no slip. Be seein' you." They rode on.

For a long breath the Kid remained dumb in the astonished silence that held the four of them. Then he muttered in a harsh undertone: "Jess, you and Joe follow Blacky and Skinny Tobin. Shorty and me will haul Jake O'Leary into camp. Come on, Shorty."

Doolittle and Rivers turned away without a word, riding along the rim of the tree belt to keep Skinny and Blacky in sight.

"It's still your show, Kid," Shorty said gravely. "I don't understand everything I know about it, but I'm still following the leader."

"I don't understand it all, either," the Kid told him. "It's phonier than I thought. Don't talk. Just come on. I got to think." But the thinking wasn't easy, as he rode on in the wake of Jake O'Leary and the gray stallion. "This was the biggest and hardest decision of the Kid's life: could a killer be forgiven? Did a killer ever deserve to be forgiven, the Kid wondered.

The Kid knew now, beyond all doubt, that Shorty didn't have anything to do with this particular piece of dirty work. And Jake was damned. Whatever Jake's part in the shady business, Jake had lied to the Kid. And that was one thing Shorty had never done. Ever since he had been on the Deerhorn ranch, the Kid had to admit that in all his dealings Shorty had been square as a die. The Kid hadn't tried to beat Shorty down again, since he'd begun work on his own transformation; with cooler thought had come the sanity of caution. He wasn't sure even yet that he could prove himself a better man than Shorty in a fist fight. And what was the use, anyhow, of making Shorty confess? The Kid already knew that it was Shorty he had seen bending over his dad's body.

Which brought it all back to the terrible decision that was hanging over the Kid. Could any man forgive a killer? And here he was trying to figure it out again, after he'd just decided to leave it to that Somebody higher up who would settle things if you just gave Him half a chance to do it.

The Kid said suddenly: "I don't know what we're lettin' him go any farther for, Shorty. Let's close in and call a showdown."

Shorty didn't answer. He didn't

need to. The Kid knew the answer. It was still the Kid's show, and Shorty was still playing follow the leader. The Kid nudged his sorrel to a faster pace, swung out in an arc, and headed in a direction to cut off Jake O'Leary, who was taking a leisurely gait toward the deeper hills with the gray stallion. Shorty followed silently, keeping close to the sorrel's flank.

They came out abruptly into another small clearing that the Kid had aimed for, within a few yards of the unsuspecting Jake O'Leary. The Kid barked a low command at the startled outlaw.

"Pull up and reach, Jake. We've got you covered."

VII

For an instant, Jake seemed to freeze in the saddle. Then he pulled his mount to a halt, and turned his head to see the Kid and Shorty there cutting off his retreat, and his startled gaze caught the glint of moonlight on the barrel of the Kid's leveled gun.

Jake stared for an instant with narrowed, dismayed eyes. He had no way of knowing that the Kid had been watching the pasture, or that the Kid had filched an extra gun from the saddle room to carry on those nights of vigil. He only knew that something had slipped, bad, somewhere, and he was going to need all the wits he had to get out of the tight spot he had unexpectedly run into.

"Take it easy, Kid," Jake said hastily. "I got your horse away from the—"

"Save it!" the Kid cut in. "We followed Skinny and Blacky all the way from the pasture gate. We heard what you said to 'em back there in the swale. Reach high and quick, or I'll let you have it. I guess you better unbuckle your gun belts and drop 'em first. And don't make a move to draw, or I'll put a bullet hole in you."

Jake O'Leary was shrewd. He knew that the least fool move would cost him his life. He had to play it smooth. But he could get out of it. He'd been in tighter holes, and he'd found the opening. He'd get out of this, and leave both the Kid and Shorty Hahn as meat for the buzzards. Slowly and carefully he moved his hands to his belt buckles, and began to unfasten the buckles, thinking fast. He had to throw the guns where he could lay hold of one of them when he wanted it. He removed both belts and tossed them one by one to the ground off to the right between him and the Kid.

He tossed them accurately to a spot where a small shrub stood up like a rock from a bare patch of ground. When he tossed the second belt, he gave it an imperceptible but skillful flip that threw the gun clear of the open-topped holster. And he watched where the gun fell; it didn't matter about the belt. That was another little trick that had stood him in good stead before. Then he raised his hands shoulder high, and looked at the Kid.

"All right," he said curtly. "Where

do we go from here, blast it?"

"Get off that horse and come over here while I tie you up," ordered the Kid. "Looks like it's you that's goin' to be turned over to the sheriff, Jake." The Kid added over his shoulder: "Keep him covered, Shorty." And he shoved his six-gun back into the leather, slid from the saddle of his little sorrel and started toward Jake.

Jake swung to the ground, walked toward the Kid till he was opposite the shrub behind which the freed gun had fallen, then he stopped, still with his hands raised. Probably the easiest way out, was to keep quiet till the Kid started to tie him, then grab, and hold the Kid between him and Shorty until he could lay hand on the gun. There wasn't anything to get worried about. He was going to come out of this fast and easy. He waited till the Kid came up and stopped behind him. He turned his head slightly till he could see the Kid out of the corner of his eye, and put his hands behind him. When he saw that the Kid was reaching for his wrists, he whirled and grabbed, so swiftly, so lithely, that the Kid was between him and Shorty Hahn before Shorty could guess his maneuver and pull trigger on him.

But the Kid was too quick. The Kid's face showed pasty white even in the moonlight, and he had never known such blasting fury in his life as that which burned through him now. But his head was clear and his hands were steady. As coolly as if there were no temper in him, he swayed back, eluding Jake's attempted bear hug. He dropped his right shoulder, doubled his fist, and came in with a rush.

The blow caught O'Leary high on the side of the head with plenty of steam. O'Leary gasped and staggered back, but before the Kid could follow it up, he drove in with a savage counter blow. The Kid instinctively rolled with the punch, but O'Leary had several pounds' weight advantage, and the Kid went down from the sheer force of the blow. O'Leary let out a roar of triumph and leaped to come down with both feet on the Kid's ribs. He knew well enough that Shorty wasn't going to risk a shot in the dim light till he could be sure of not hitting the Kid. He was right in that. Shorty held his fire.

But the Kid rolled with the easy evasion of a cat and was on his feet in a flash. He barely gained an upright position when O'Leary rushed again. And O'Leary wasn't fighting as wildly as he might seem; he was working with every move toward the spot where the freed gun had fallen. The Kid ducked a whistling haymaker and neatly parried a hard left jab.

Then suddenly he took the offensive away from O'Leary. But he did not duck his head and rush in blind mad, the thing O'Leary had been hoping and waiting for. He flicked out with a long left that took a patch of hide off O'Leary's nose. Involuntarily, Jake lifted his guard, and the Kid drove in with a short hard right that landed in the pit of O'Leary's

belly, and brought a sharp grunt of pain from the bigger man's battered lips.

That was when O'Leary began to feel the swift stab of warning alarm. The Kid wasn't going to lose his head and go to pieces. He had done that job of self-discipline too well; he was probably as mad as he had ever been in his life, but he was cool as ice. With a wave of dismay, O'Leary suddenly reached out with open arms, took a quick hook around the Kid's neck, hugged him close, and drove a desperate knee into the Kid's groin, all with one fast motion.

But again the Kid, almost superhuman in that cold fury, was too fast for him. The Kid twisted his body with the ease of an eel and took the treacherous blow on his hip bone, ducked his head into O'Leary's chest, brought his head up under O'Leary's chin with a sharp crack, and broke Jake's hug.

Then the Kid waded in, even yet not charging blindly, but with his head high and both eyes open, hitting like an automaton. He lashed out with furious rights and lefts, backed by the full strength of his tough young body, with the steam of his cold-cased fury behind every blow. He drove O'Leary back steadily and relentlessly. O'Leary brought up both arms to protect his face from the Kid's fists.

The Kid measured him coolly, and drove a savage right into the pit of Jake's solar plexus with all the steam he had. Jake gasped and doubled up, and the Kid drove another savage blow into his pain-twisted face. O'Leary went down.

But despite the worst of the punishment the Kid was meting out, O'Leary still kept his head enough to maneuver toward the fallen waiting gun. And when he went down, the gun was almost within his reach. But he knew several things now. He knew that he could not whip the Kid, and he knew that he had to stop the fight, or he wouldn't have enough strength left to make a get-away even after he had blasted down both the Kid and Shorty Hahn. He shivered with the paralyzing fear that washed through him.

There was just one thing he had to do. He had to stop the demoralizing drive of those battering fists and reach the gun. And to do that he had to rivet the attention of both Shorty and the Kid so completely that they wouldn't realize what he was doing. He made no attempt to get to his feet. He lay there half doubled up, and his groan of pain was not faked. Neither was the half gasp with which he caught his breath as he opened his mouth to speak.

Before he could say a word, Shorty Hahn's voice rose from beyond and behind the Kid, in a flat, clear statement:

"I don't know what sort of slick lies he told them two rannies that swiped the gray, Kid, but *he's* the rat that killed your dad and your kid brother. Make him come clean, and lace into him with both fists if he don't talk."

O'Leary shrank back against the ground—and slid another inch to-

ward the gun. He could see it now from the tail of his eye, lying there by the little round shrub, gleaming dully in the moonlight. It occurred to him suddenly that the best way to stop the pound of the Kid's fists, and keep his and Shorty's attention riveted, was to spit out the truth, the truth that would shock the Kid into temporary paralysis of all movement while the Kid was still squarely between Jake and Shorty. It didn't matter what the Kid knew, anyhow. Within a few seconds both the Kid and Shorty Hahn would be feed for the buzzards.

The Kid leaned toward Jake, both fists ready, and his voice was as brittle as ice. "Come on, Jake, there's too much about this I don't understand. Spill it."

Jake was still gasping from that solar-plexus blow, but he was beginning to get his wind back. He said between gasps: "O. K. I'll talk. But keep your hands off me. Yeah, I'm the guy that killed 'em, both of 'em." He moved another inch toward the gun. "But don't forget that Shorty was roddin' the gang."

"That's a lie," rapped Shorty. "Bore into him, Kid. *He's afraid of the fists that can hammer him.* Ask him who I am, ask him what I was doin' there that day."

Jake swallowed, and pulled himself still another inch toward the gun. One more move and he'd have it in his hand. He said sourly: "He's my brother. And I sure ain't proud of the fact."

Bewilderment flared in the Kid's eyes. "You're Shorty's *brother!* But my dad killed Shorty's brother!"

"No," Shorty said. "He shot him, Kid. He thought he'd killed him. I thought he was dead myself when I found him. I knowed he was a skunk, but he was my brother, my half brother. So I picked him up and wet-nursed him for two months till he was on his feet. And how did he thank me for it? He cracked my head with a gun barrel, from behind, and left *me* for dead. That's how I got that scar, Kid. Go on, ask him what I was doin' there that day."

Revulsion shook the Kid, at the sudden revelation, and for one wild instant he was sick at thought of how nearly he had killed the wrong man. He swayed toward O'Leary, both fists threatening. "Well!"

Jake was breathing easy now, and he felt a sweep of wild triumph. He was going to make it. Nothing mattered now. He was going to make it and win free. Both Shorty and the Kid were so intent on hearing what he had to say, he could jump up and yell before they'd come out of it enough to make a move. He answered the Kid with mocking insolence:

"You might as well know the whole business. Shorty always made me sick, struttin' around with that holier-than-thou air of his, tryin' to reform his poor wicked brother. Even after I split his fool head for him, he was still tryin' it. He got wind that I was takin' my gang to git even with your old man for puttin' a

bullet through me, an' he come racin' to try to stop it. He was too late. If he hadn't been such a softy, and stopped to find out if any of you was alive and there was anything he could do for you, he might have caught up with the gang. But we got the lead on him then, and I got clean away."

O'Leary snatched up the gun, and swung it into position from where he lay, roaring in his final surge of triumph: "Just as I'm gettin' away now, blast you!"

The Kid had no time to move. Shorty had no chance to fire without hitting the Kid. O'Leary thrust the gun upward and pulled the trigger, point-blank at the Kid's chest not five feet away.

For as long as he lived, the Kid remembered that he had told himself he was leaving it to that Somebody higher up to settle the score. The gun had fallen hard, plowed into the loose gravelly earth with momentum enough to plug the barrel with earth and stone, a little ragged-edged stone that was set into the bore as if it had been welded there.

The gun blew up in O'Leary's hand. The top of the hammer hurtled backward, drove through his right eye and embedded itself in his treacherous brain. Before the Kid's dazed gaze, and Shorty's widened stare, O'Leary let out one last choked gasp and fell back, dead.

For a long minute, the Kid stood still, then he shut his eyes, and turned his head. Then, turning clear around, he opened his eyes and looked at Shorty. Shorty had slid to the ground, and stood there facing him, and behind Shorty were two moon-outlined figures on horseback, Joe Rivers and Jess Doolittle.

"Go ahead, Kid," Doolittle said quietly. "Git it off your chest. Don't mind us. The other two showed fight an' we had to drill 'em. Then we followed you'n' Shorty. We come up just in time to hear Jake sing his little song. Lay it on the line, Kid. We're with you."

The Zero Kid stared into Shorty's face and tried to speak, but there was a lump in his throat, and the words wouldn't come.

"O. K., Kid," Shorty said softly. "You've said it. Your face says it, even in the moonlight. But it had to end like this, Kid. You'd never have believed me if I'd told you the truth. I never knew you was alive till you showed up on the Deerhorn, and I've knowed all along what you thought. But I had to wait. Don't you think, maybe, that you an' me has lone-wolfed it long enough, Kid? A team always pulls better than a lone nag."

But the Kid couldn't get his jaws unlocked. He did the only thing he could do right then. He lifted a hand, and rubbed away the blur in his eyes, and held the other hand out to Shorty.

"*Bueno*, partner," Shorty said. "Now round up the gray and let's hit for home. I reckon you'n' me are goin' to sleep easy tonight for the first time in six years."

THE END

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That wild young owlhooter didn't even trust his own shadow —yet he left himself wide open for a double-crossing drygulcher's

BULLETS ACROSS THE BORDER

By Hapsburg Liebe

THERE was a McClellan saddle and a McClellan wagon. Old-timers will tell you that both were good; that both served even as the Colt served, and the Winchester. The badlands' kid was named for the wagon, not the saddle.

He was around nineteen, slim as a reed, tough as rawhide and hard as rock. He had to be hard and tough in order to survive. Dressed well, you'd have thought he was at least a cousin of Fauntleroy's, so delicate were his features. These had deceived many a man twice his age and were to deceive many another.

But they didn't fool the somberly clad stranger who found him at a table in the combination hotel and saloon that was the center of things in Triple Buttes. The stranger dropped easily into a chair across from the kid, and watched him tear through a steak as though he hadn't had anything to eat for days.

"Got some business with me?" asked the kid.

"Maybe," admitted the stranger.

"Out with it."

The stranger was tall and lean, close to forty. He had level gray eyes and there was fight in his jaw. After a glance toward the cowboys and miners who thronged the dimly lighted big room, he said quietly:

"You're from Yellow Creek, kid. You're riding to Dos Palmas on the border with a message to a man named Medroso, who poses as a Mexican but isn't. The message is sealed. You don't know what's in it. Gudger Ott sent it. Ott is the biggest cow thief in the Southwest. Medroso is his partner, operating below the line. Ott posed as your friend, and you've never had many friends, so you're hell-bent on getting that message through. I'm right, kid."

"S'pose you are?" McClellan threw back in cold defiance. "If I wanted to know what's in the letter, what's to keep me from openin' it?"

"Plenty," said the stranger. "You never went to school a minute in your life, can't read, and wouldn't trust any man to read the letter for you."

That was a bull's-eye shot.

"For somebody who never seen me before, you sure know a heap about me!" McClellan flared.

"I talked to people, that's all," the stranger told him. "Everybody knew that an old Mexican woman found you when you were two-three years old, floating down a rampaging river in a wagon bed that had stayed on the surface when the running gears sank. Your folks and the team were drowned, of course. Nothing to identify you, so the old woman gave you the name that was on the wagon bed. You hit out for yourself as soon as you could ride a horse. All this sort of got under my skin, and—"

The kid's six-shooter interrupted. It blasted just above the table rim, not at the stranger but at the nearest of the big, hanging oil lamps. McClellan was suspicious. Nothing was going to keep him from taking that message to Medroso. Semi-darkness and thick powder smoke covered his getaway perfectly.

Hard luck had been with McClellan on this trip. Between Yellow Creek and Fireplace his pony had gone badly lame, costing him much time. Otherwise the stranger wouldn't have overtaken him at Triple Buttes. That stranger stuck in his mind as he rode the night. It was true, that he'd had few friends, as the unknown man had said. Also it was true that he'd thrown in with Gudger Ott, the big cow thief, because Ott, who had stuck up a stagecoach the week before, had stood in the role of friend.

At daybreak the kid was red-eyed from weariness and loss of sleep, and

the condition of his mount was worse. Twenty miles, he figured, still lay between him and Dos Palmas on the border; it was all desert terrain now, clogging sand, rock, and the eternal pear.

In three hours he covered less than half the twenty miles. The sun was a furnace now. Then he rode around a pear thicket and saw just ahead of him a long-deserted patchwork shanty and a waterhole with a little grass around its edges.

"We'll rest here one hour, hoss," muttered McClellan.

After he'd watered himself and the horse, McClellan staked the animal to the sparse grass, went into the shanty and threw himself down on the earthen floor and in no time was asleep. He never know how long he'd slept when the nickering of his horse brought him to his feet with his six-shooter ready in his hand.

From the doorway he saw, sitting a fine but much worn, lean bay gelding just beyond the waterhole, the black-garbed stranger whom he had encountered in the saloon.

McClellan jerked his gun up.

"What the devil you follerin' me for?" he demanded.

The unknown was armed. The ivory grips of a long-barreled six-shooter were to be seen under the edge of his black coat. But he made no move toward the weapon. Smiling a little, he said:

"I told you back in Triple Buttes last night, kid, that you'd sort of got under my skin. I didn't want to kill you, didn't want you to kill me. I knew you'd never believe me if I told you who I am, and I had no proof. You probably won't believe me now. but I'll do my best to convince you. That message to Medroso; I'm not quite sure what it is, but I'm betting that I've got a better idea about it than you have. I—"

"Got a better idea about it than I have, huh?" McClellan cut in hotly. His gun was still a deadly menace, but the stranger did not seem afraid.

"You never had a worthwhile chance," he said, "and you're so hard and dangerous that it's almost impossible to give you one. Though you've started riding with Gudger Ott, there's nothing much against you so far. But if you go on you'll hit the outlaw trail, and you'll never get out of it except by bullet or rope. So I'm asking you to listen while I—"

Suddenly McClellan lost his temper completely at this interference. He lifted his gun to a quick but careful aim. Killing was not and never had been in his line, but he could ventilate the stranger's black hat and order him to hightail. His six-shooter flamed and roared. He was a dead shot. More than once he'd knocked the pips neatly out of a six-spot spade.

A vagrant breath of wind blew the smoke away and McClellan could see again. Over there beyond the waterhole the unknown lay facing upward in the sand, quite still!

The first feeling of dread that McClellan had ever experienced ran through him like black lightning now. He hadn't meant to hit the

man. But he certainly couldn't have killed him. He just wasn't that bad a shot!

He really wasn't. His slug had grazed the top of the man's head and the man was unconscious, nothing more.

Somehow McClellan couldn't find it in him to leave the stranger lying like that in the broiling desert. He was going to Dos Palmas anyway, to take that message to Medroso from Gudger Ott.

A few miles short of the little border town, the stranger came to and found himself tied across his saddle. The kid was leading the bay gelding. The stranger called to the kid who reined in and dismounted. In about five more minutes, the stranger, with the kid's help, was forking his bay properly.

"Under the circumstances, I . . . I didn't think you'd shoot, McClellan. Didn't try to *kill* me, did you?"

"Me takin' you in," said the slim blue-eyed youth, "is the answer to that. Meant to throw a scare into you and send you hightailin' about your business, if you got any business besides snoopin'. Here's your iron. You can hightail now!"

The tall, somberly dressed stranger took his ivory-butted weapon and leathered it. He said nothing.

McClellan got back into his saddle and rode on. A little rise in the desert terrain soon hid the stranger from his view.

Rested and watered, at least half fed, the second-rate horse was doing better now. Noon was not long past when McClellan pulled up in front of a Dos Palmas cantina. A Mexican sat drowsing on a bench in the shade of the adobe wall.

"Know where Señor Medroso is, amigo?" the kid called in Spanish.

"That way," the Mexican answered, also in Spanish, and pointed eastward along the hot, dusty street.

So the kid rode eastward. Stone markers told him that he was still in the United States. When he had come to a sprawling adobe house half hidden among pepper trees and palmettos, he stopped and hallooed.

The man who came out was squat, dark and slit-eyed, and the six-shooter he carried was low-slung. McClellan stepped out of his saddle, dropped rein and spoke.

"You Medroso?"

"I sure ain't nobody else," the squat man snarled. "Why?"

That talk was ample proof of the fact that Medroso was no Mexican.

"Gudger Ott sent me down from Yellow Creek with a letter to you," McClellan said. "Had the devil of a time gettin' here with it. Bothered a heap by a tall jigger who had on black clothes. You got any ideas about who he is, Medroso?"

"No," the outlaw said. He wasn't interested. "Gudger's letter—give it to me!"

McClellan dug inside his dusty, sweat-stained shirt and produced the now much-crumpled missive. Medroso took it and snapped an end off the envelope. Unfolding the single sheet of paper he read the few lines hastily. There was no signature. But Medroso knew his big cow thief

partner's scrawl as well as his own handwriting.

Medroso did an unexpected thing. His mouth popped open, his dark eyes rounded in a stare across McClellan's shoulder, and he barked:

"Look behind you, kid!"

The kid wheeled, reaching fast for his weapon. In that same second a six-shooter thundered from palmettos about thirty yards out to his right. He heard the bullet, but he was not hurt. From just back of him there came the thump of a human body falling, and he turned swiftly to see that Medroso was already dead. But Medroso had drawn his gun, plainly having intended to back-shoot young McClellan.

The black-garbed stranger came running from the palmettos. He snatched the message from the sand, glanced at it hurriedly and consigned it to a coat pocket. Then he seized young McClellan's arm.

"Quick, kid; let's go."

The kid tossed the rein over his horse's head and went up to the saddle in one movement. A few seconds later he was riding northward with the black-clad man. After a little while, the kid spoke.

"You stood in the United States and killed a man in Mexico, to keep him from shootin' me in the back. How come?"

"This Medroso," the stranger explained, "was paid for. Wanted dead or alive in Texas, Nueva Mex, and Arizona, for half a dozen cold-blooded killings. That's why he handled the Mexico end of his and Gudger Ott's sort of international cow-stealing business. But Ott is finished, too. He'd got restless and stuck up a stagecoach. You knew about that, McClellan."

"Yeah," McClellan admitted. "But I didn't take a part in it."

"We figured that. Ott was arrested an hour after you left Yellow Creek. He was going to make sure you didn't testify against him—that's the kind of friend he was to you. But me, I *am* your friend. Meaning, I represent the law. Lost my badge, and felt I'd never be able to convince you without it. Well, kid, I've got a brother on a big ranch in Texas, and I'll send you to him if you'll go. You'll be somebody there. Will you go?"

McClellan was a little bewildered. Always he'd looked upon the law as an enemy, not as a friend.

"Who are you?" he blurted. "A sheriff?"

"No. U. S. deputy marshal. Happened there was a mailbag on the stage that Ott stuck up, and he took it, as you must have seen. That message you carried to Medroso, ordering him to kill you because you were dangerous, cinches the case against Ott; see why I wanted it, don't you? Now will you go to Texas and a good range job?"

"I sure will," the slim blue-eyed youth who had been named for a wagon promised solemnly and in genuine gratitude, and his hand shot out to seal the bargain.

THE END

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THE NAVAJO BLANKET

By Rod Patterson

Could Ray Trask keep that lynch-primed posse off his trail long enough to find the key to the Salt Creek Flats' murder mystery?

I

RAY TRASK came into River Bend at noon that day, sitting high and easy on the blanket-covered seat of his old spring wagon drawn by a team of slat-ribbed mules—not a big man, but tall and stocky and resolute, with bright hazel eyes set in an angular face. Weather had darkened him, and work had thinned him down; and, though he was faintly smiling now, he wore the almost severe expression of a young man who has seen too much trouble.

At this moment he was filled with a mild exhilaration, for, unlike many of his friends on Salt Creek Flats—emigrants from the Kansas plains—he had learned the knack of drawing pleasure out of small things. Today he was savoring that feeling of good fortune. Folded neatly in the pocket of his threadbare denim shirt was a brand-new twenty-dollar bill.

The wheels of the heavy dray wagon lifted and dropped thin, cascades of tawny dust as he turned the team into the big bare lot between the courthouse and the Sundown Hotel & Bar. Most of the Salt Creek homesteaders tied here when they came to town.

Ray eased himself down to the wagon tongue, then to the ground, a

broad smile now etched on his pleasing face. Three hours ago he had delivered a load of peeled basswood poles to Lawyer John Tammany's ranch at Piny Ridge, and now he was heading for Harker's Emporium to buy a little of the food and clothing he had long required and had not had the money to purchase until today.

A solid, loose-limbed and deliberate man of twenty-six who had worked too long with his hands to waste motion, he took his own time with the simple chore of tying the mules to the pine rail that rimmed the lot, and at which a few other farmers' rigs were tied. And he was like this, carefully knotting the hackamore of the off mule, when he picked up the swift and steady scud of a man's boots over the hard-packed earth in back of him. He turned his head, staring against the sun glare, and saw Ollie Young, his nearest neighbor on the Flats, coming toward him at a pounding walk.

Ollie slid to a halt, a chunky, grave-faced man with a head of sorrel-colored hair, and he dropped his bombshell words between gasping,

long-pulled breaths. "Jumpin' catfish, Ray, there's hell to pay!"

Ray's black eyebrows went up. "Gosh, Ollie, you look like you'd seen a spook!"

The nester swallowed hard, his pale eyes round and wide and panic-stricken. "Sam Lockerbie's been killed! Murdered—out at Hat Ranch a little while ago!"

Shock loosened the lines of Ray's lean face. "Murdered? Jehoshaphat, Ollie, do they know—"

The nester's words came tumbling out. "Sam was shot in the back and they're hookin' you up with it! You got to git out o' town right now—"

"Me?" Ray was staring blankly, incredulously at his friend. "Why, what would I wanta kill Sam for? His foreman brought a note from the old man last night sayin' Sam wanted to talk to me! I—was headin' out to Hat right straight from here!"

"The man that killed him stole all the money in Sam's office safe—his papers, mortgages, everything—"

"Wait a minute!" A grim look was crawling over Ray's flat mouth.

"They even took an old *bayeta* blanket off the wall," the nester blurted out. "They're sayin' you could've been the one that done it, 'count o' that augerment yuh had with Sam, and everybuddy savvies yuh been broke!"

"For Pete's sake," Ray cried angrily, "I ain't the only one that stood to lose if Lockerbie squeezed us off the Flats!"

"Well, Lud Rawson's the hombre that's doin' the talkin'! And folks'll listen to Lockerbie's foreman, you know that!"

There was a silence in which only the distant sound of voices in the square was heard. And then Ray said resentfully: "I can prove I didn't shoot Sam. I been up at Lawyer Tammany's place since nine o'clock."

"Take my hoss," Ollie ordered in an urgent, fearful tone. "It's over behind the blacksmith shop. Yuh c'n hide in my barn, and I'll tip off Darrel Widmer and Frank Callahan —they're in town!"

"No," Ray said with flat finality, "I won't run!"

"It might start a nester-cattle war, Ray," Ollie said forebodingly. "Don't let that happen, pard, even if yuh don't care about your own darn neck!"

"I'm headin' for the Emporium," Ray told him, a doggedness in his voice. "You're bein' spooky over nothin'."

But as he walked toward the Emporium three blocks away, his thoughts turned back to a day now three weeks past—the day Sam Lockerbie and three of his crew had ridden austerely into the yard of his farm at Salty Ford. Gaunt and stern in the saddle of his blaze-faced roan, the old rancher made a picture Ray would never forget. Lockerbie had cold blue eyes that could cut like steel.

"Trask, do you take me for a sucker and a fool?" he had demanded bluntly.

Ray had faced him in front of his log-sided cabin, and he carefully kept

the anger he felt from showing on his face. Here, he knew, was a range-land autocrat who had fed his ambition on easy victories and would continue his quest for wealth and power until the day he died. Lockerbie was flanked by his foreman, Lud Rawson, and by two of his crew; and Ray also watched these men as he made his curt reply.

"No, you're not a fool," he said, slowly, mildly. "You're an old skin-flint!"

Lockerbie's eyes were bold and strong and he spoke with a sharp ring in his voice, a brusque and possessive rise: "I hold a mortgage on this land—on the whole damn Indigo Strip! But I ain't had a payment from you plowmen fer eight months! Now you'll pay up or I'll throw yuh out!"

Ray stood erectly and took that blast of words. "I told you last time why we can't pay," he said quietly, though his eyes were dark and hard. "You and men like you have killed our credit with the traders in the Basin. And when our crops go bad we got to save our pennies or starve to death!"

"Your troubles," the old man retorted, "are no concern of mine! I don't run my business the way you'd like me to!" He leaned forward and hit Ray with his loud down-slapping voice: "You'll pay me two hundred dollars in thirty days or out you go!"

"Mister Lockerbie," Ray answered as steadily and calmly as he could, "there's a long winter ahead of me, with grub and feed and medicine to buy—and there ain't a Confed'rate dollar in my jeans. You'll just have to wait."

Lud Rawson, sitting stiffly on his sorrel horse, now spoke: "You got gall, nester! We let you turn good grass upside down and cut the land up with your blasted wire, and when we're good enough to leave you stay; you turn around and want the land free-hold!" The foreman of Hat Ranch had worked so long a time for Lockerbie that he had grown to talk like him—look like him. Though twenty years younger, he had the same cold eyes, the same arrogant manner, the same intolerant voice; and now his bronzed, wedge-shaped face was dark with scorn. "Pay up, nester—or move your stringy carcass off this land!"

Ray stared, unmoved, and when he spoke his tone was not angry, but calm and reasoning: "You ain't big enough to try and dispossess a hundred families from their homes and livelihood."

"Is that all you've got to say?" demanded Lockerbie.

"It is, by grab!"

"Well, then," the old man yelled, "I'll have John Tammany draw foreclosure papers up! We'll see what your damned sodbuster law can do for you!"

Pacing over the rough plank walk beneath a glaring overhead sun, Ray Trask considered these thoughts and now, ruefully, he had his clear intimation of the disaster that lay ahead—disaster not only for himself but for all the homesteaders of Salt Creek Flats. The threat of legal action had

been a serious thing alone, but now the man who held the whip hand over the Basin was dead—murdered! And, if what Ollie Young had said was true, the damning finger of suspicion was pointed at him, Ray Trask! Nevertheless and notwithstanding, he could not bring himself to feel worry or trepidation—not for himself, at least. For Lockerbie had been killed while he, Ray, had been unloading the basswood poles at Lawyer Tammany's ranch. He had talked to the shrewd and suave-voiced attorney and that would irrevocably be his alibi.

Ray became aware all at once of the street up which he was so slowly and deliberately traveling. There was something queer and unnatural about River Bend this afternoon—something definitely wrong. And now he realized that he had caught the smell of it when he had driven into town less than half an hour ago. He now surveyed the street and the square ahead out of wary eyes, trying to search out the hidden danger that might be waiting for him in the byways and crannies of the town.

He saw the shops and saloons, the shabby back-street dives and honkatonks, the drab uneven line of building fronts, the weathered gray adobe structures to right and left. There was a feeling here of hard watchfulness and silence.

By night this strange silence, this tension, would have been no concern to Ray, but in the full and glaring light of this summer's day, it was somehow both eerie and sepulchral. He came to the intersection of Choctaw Street, and, with the Sundown Hotel at his back, headed at a leisurely pace across the dusty square toward Cass Harker's Emporium. A hundred yards from the squatting mud-walled building, he saw the gray, vague forms of four men who lounged indifferently on the gallery.

Ray recognized all four riders. The tall, thick-set one wearing goatskin chaps and a black sombrero was Lud Rawson, foreman of Hat Ranch, boss of the outfit now that Sam Lockerbie was dead. The other men, leaning against the scarred railing with their backs to the street were Hat cowboys: Dick Shorey, Pete Merke, Bill Dowd.

Ray came up and immediately mounted the six plank steps to the gallery of the store, his pace on the boards as soundless as an Indian's, the holstered gun riding on his hip almost cockily. He passed Rawson and his men without a word, moving at once into the store's cavelike, cool interior, but he was not oblivious to the cold and suspicious stares that followed him.

The store had the dank smell of a mud-walled building in summertime—it had other smells, as well, and this pungency was a strong odor which Ray took in like an actual taste in his mouth: the scent of fresh-ground coffee; the heady tang of spice; the sour fragrance of vinegar and pickled fish; the keen and tidy smell of cloth in bolts, of new leather and Indian saddle blankets.

Ray went down the narrow aisle between two rows of hanging blan-

kets and saddle gear and came to the dry-goods section of the post. The shirt he was wearing was bleached almost white by sun and frequent laundering, and it was split obliquely down the back to show a glimpse of firm sun-blackened skin, of muscles bulging and hard and hawser-strong. Abruptly he peeled the shirt from his shoulders and stood naked to the waist while he thumbed through a pile of new hickory shirts to find his size. He was like this, stoical, aloof, lean torso as copper-gleaming as a Navajo's, when Cass Harker, the storekeeper, came waddling down behind his counter.

The sunlight reached this region of the post as a filtered pale glow, and yet it was bright enough to show how fat and pompous a man Cass Harker was, how untidy in greasy overalls he was, how hard-bitten and mean his pale-lipped mouth.

"No trust, nester," Harker said in his whining, child-high voice. "Cash on the counter, or out yuh go!"

Ray pushed his tight gaze against the man, saying with a deep, corrosive bitterness: "Cass, if I shoved a finger in that pursely gut of yours you'd blow up like a kid's balloon! I'm payin' cash for what I want!" He drew the twenty dollar bill from his jeans and slapped it hard upon the bar, along with a scribbled list of groceries. "Put this order up and do it fast!"

Ten minutes later, Harker made change, and Ray said, "I'll drive up in front for the stuff," then turned and swung toward the door. He reached the gallery, reminded suddenly of the four men who still were waiting there, and he checked himself up short, for Lud Rawson was deliberately blocking his way at the top of the steps. The foreman had his burly arms folded across his barrel chest, and his blue eyes glittered like nail heads.

"Trask," he drawled in a purposely laconic voice, "we wanta know where yuh got the dinero yuh jest spent in there. And after that, you c'n tell us some other things we wanta know."

Fully halted, tensely eying the man who blocked his way, Ray said: "One side, Rawson—I ain't got time to talk to you."

"You'll talk," said the foreman, assurance and contempt in his tone, "or, mister, I'll crawl your hump!"

"Lud," Ray said slowly, deliberately, "you can go to blazes!"

Blood stormed blackly into Rawson's face. He let his arms come down, and he braced himself preparedly. "Why, you blasted savage, you killed Sam Lockerbie!"

II

Ray remained a stiff and motionless shape on the gallery, taking Lud Rawson's accusing stare. Where it would have been easy for him to thrust the foreman out of his way and run for it, ignoring Hat, it was not easy for him to stand here continuing this duel of wits and words. And so the thin thread of his patience snapped and he pushed toward Rawson with the cry: "Stand back or I'll bust you one, blast it!"

It was a kind of stubborn concession to Ray's nerve that made the foreman rear back toward the steps behind him—and it was then that boots came kicking down the plank walk and a hoarse voice yelled: "Hold him, Lud! Don't let him git away!"

The cowboy who rushed up to the gallery afterward was Harry Duff, Hat's top hand; and Harry was breathing in gusts from his unaccustomed running. "I—jest seen Lockerbie's *bayeta* blanket, Lud!" he gasped, his shoulders lifting and falling with his heavy breathing. "Trask's got it on his wagon seat! It's red and black—the same damn one, I'll take my oath!"

Ray, stopped dead by Duff's quick-lifting voice, watched the look on Rawson's face begin to change. Suddenly the foreman's eyes grew round and wide and downright pleased. Then all that silence broke wide open with Rawson's angry shout as he sprang at Ray.

Ray ducked under the foreman's first blind, hard-swinging blow, but as he came erect, dancing agilely on his toes, he took Rawson's fists on his chest and staggered back. Then Rawson charged, head down; and Ray straightened up and threw the foreman backward on his heels with two piston-driven blows, afterward standing still, waiting, his breathing a little deeper, watching Rawson gather his wits and lunge at him again.

The scuffle of their boots was a steady sibilant sound in all that quiet, and now, suddenly, the beat of hard-flung fists laid flat echoes across the heat. The Hat boys, knotted at the rail, followed each staggering lunge, each swift retreat with slitted avid eyes, like animals drawn by the smell of blood.

More blows made sodden echoes on the gallery; and then Lud Rawson went down under Ray's trip-hammer punch to the jaw—but Ray saw him start up from the floor again, the look on his face wicked, and he knew right then that Rawson was furious enough to keep on until he killed his man or was killed himself.

They were evenly matched on height and weight, but Ray easily outmaneuvered Rawson now; and Rawson charged and charged again in short, savage spurts, each time beating Ray back a little more. But suddenly and without warning Ray slid under the foreman's guard and jarred him with short lifting jabs. It was the break. Ray pulled back his right arm and measured Rawson and hit him again and again in the face, slugging all consciousness out of him, battering him to his knees in a burst of hateful energy. He had fractured Lud Rawson's nose, had pounded his mouth to a crimson blob of flesh.

Ray held himself alert and watching for a move from the three Hat boys who still stood tensely grouped against the gallery rail. When no move or threat of action came, he stood back and waited a moment for Lud Rawson to show signs of life; then when the foreman didn't stir or speak, Ray shook the tension out of his shoulders and walked de-

liberately down to the walk, passing the stunned and staring Harry Duff who never made a move to draw his gun, and moving resolutely out across the square's thick dust toward the lot where his mules were tied.

A block from the Emporium, however, a voice issuing from the doorway of a vacant shop hailed him softly, harshly: "Ray! In here!"

It was Ollie Young who spoke to him in so terrified a tone; and Ray turned and moved against the man, holding him with his steady eyes. "You saw it?" he asked the nester in a bleak, hard voice.

Ollie nodded, staring. "That Navajo blanket—I seen Duff climb up to look at it, and—" His voice faded to a feeble squeak.

"That Navajo belongs to me," Ray told him grimly. "My father left it to me when he died!"

"Then you didn't—"

"No," cut in Ray curtly "I didn't shoot Lockerbie! I can prove it, too!"

Suspicious now of every sound, Ollie ducked to the edge of the doorway, squinting down the street to where people were stirring up a dust in front of the Emporium. "You gotta ride! They'll hang yuh if yuh don't!"

"Where's Callahan and Widmer and the boys?" demanded Ray.

"In the hotel bar, but you better not—"

"Come on!" Ray moved abruptly out of the doorway, swinging on his solid legs toward the Sundown Hotel, a hundred yards away. Crossing through the hotel's lobby, half filled with riders and townsmen, Ray towed Ollie after him as though Ollie was tied to him by a rope instead of merely by a mutual need of company.

A red-faced cowboy loitered in the doorway leading from the lobby into the barroom on the right, and this man made no attempt to step aside but remained where he was, indolent, engrossed in his own thoughts, or pretending to be. Ray paused, waiting; the man still made no move, and suddenly Ray brushed him ruthlessly aside with his arm and entered the bar.

Darrel Widmer, leader of the grangers, a long thin farmer with a huge hook nose and suspicious agate-colored eyes, was standing at the flat bare bar. Beside him stood Frank Callahan, dark-eyed, taciturn, slow to move and speak. Both of these men turned their heads as Ray and Ollie strode in and came toward them, and Widmer said: "Trask, if I thought you'd killed Sam Lockerbie and got us in this damned jackpot, I'd burn yuh down!"

Ray took the onset of Widmer's accusing eyes unflinchingly, and he saw the look of rank distrust in Callahan's black stare. "I didn't kill Sam," he said levelly, steadily. "And the Navajo blanket they're talkin' about belongs to me—and always has!"

"What about the money yuh jest spent at the Emporium?" Widmer demanded suspiciously. "You been as broke as the rest of us!"

Ray waved it away, his face, his

eyes implacable. "I can explain all that. But what I want—"

"The fat's in the fire," Frank Callahan exploded angrily. "The cattlemen'll hit the Flats and wipe us out as sure as sin!"

"No, they won't!" Ray flung his answer back impatiently. "Because I can prove I never killed Lockerbie—and I can prove it as soon as John Tammany reaches town!"

"John Tammany!" gasped Widmer and Callahan in unison. Then Widmer sneered: "Why, Tammany's attorney for Hat-Ranch! Yuh don't expect—"

Ollie Young who had moved nervously to the window of the barroom, now turned back to make his hoarse report: "Tammany jest drove in—he's in his office now!"

Ray turned at once and wheeled toward the street door, all three nesters following him into the street's hard glare; whereupon the group swung over the dust toward the Smith Block Building, a two-storied structure containing the offices of a dentist, a barber, a doctor, and three lawyers.

The rickety stairway creaked and groaned under the unaccustomed weight as they mounted to the second floor where they were confronted by one door with the caption, JOHN J. TAMMANY—ATTORNEY, painted on it in flamboyant red print.

Ray knocked, went in without waiting, and turned to the wooden wicket which enclosed a flat-topped desk and an ancient cast-iron safe. John Tammany looked up from a pile of documents on the desk, a tall, thin gray-haired man in a long-tailed coat, stiff-bosomed shirt and flowing black string tie. He did not rise, but said, with slightly lifted brows: "Well, what can I do—" Recognizing Ray Trask, he stopped, a coldness crawling over his gaunt face.

"Sorry to bother you," Ray apologized, "but I need your help. Lud Rawson's accused me of killin' Sam Lockerbie, and—"

"Well, didn't you kill him?" Tammany leaned back carefully in his swivel chair, his expression still one of cold reserve. The light from a side window shone on his high forehead, shadows dark on his hollowed cheeks and in the deep recesses of his peculiar feline eyes.

The effect on Ray and his companions was that of a bombshell exploded unexpectedly in their faces. The eyes of Widmer and Callahan went completely blank. Ollie Young stood motionless, open-mouthed. Ray looked stunned, like a man clubbed in the head by a pistol butt. But at last, when he found the words, he gasped: "Why, I was up at your ranch when Old Sam was killed! You paid me off yourself when I delivered that load of basswood poles!"

"Basswood poles?" John Tammany began to look annoyed. "Trask, I don't know what you're talking about." He swung his hard eyes on Darrel Widmer and Frank Callahan. "Gents, I'll thank you to take your friend elsewhere."

"Are you denyin'," Ray cut in

angrily, "that you paid me twenty dollars for a load of corral rails?"

Tammany turned back to his desk, waved them away with a curt: "Good day."

A muscle knotted at Ray's lean jaw. He turned on the astonished Widmer and Callahan, very cold, very deliberate in his anger now. "Well," he said blandly, harshly, "it begins to look like I stand alone!"

Widmer and Callahan exchanged quick looks, doubt, uncertainty, a mark on their sunburned faces. Then Widmer let his hand go down toward his holstered gun, and he pulled his long mouth tight; and the taint of anger touched his cheeks. Ollie Young stood by and merely stared bewilderedly.

It was at that moment that the far sound of yelling voices reached them through the wide-open window over the lawyer's desk; and Ray jerked himself around and moved swiftly out into the corridor and down the stairs.

"Ray, wait!" cried Ollie and promptly took after him, his big boots raking echoes out of the hallway as he ran.

Downstairs Ray stopped short, then pulled back in the outer doorway, staring with a fast-growing concern toward Harker's Emporium, with the whole dusty sweep of the square before him and the crowd in view, two blocks away. And Ray saw the burly form of Lud Rawson on the gallery of the store, talking rancorously to the throng below and gesturing with his big red hands.

Ollie's voice pelted out of the hallway as he came rushing full tilt into the street's bright glare. "Ray, take my hoss and burn the breeze! I'll drive your wagon back! Go on—go on!"

But Ray continued to scan the street and its moving, excited figures. And now, suddenly, he saw a few cowboys drifting toward the horse racks, shouldering through the close-packed crowd, their big-brimmed hats rising and falling in that ruck of dust and men. Ray's tight gaze traveled out across the square, searching those cowmen out with a hard and constant care; and as he stood there, lank, strained and nerved-up by the sight, he appeared not like a man, but like an animal undecided on attack or flight, and now he seemed to keen the town with his slitted hazel eyes for an answer to the question that must be decided instantly.

Suspicious of every moving thing, Ollie Young jumped suddenly. "Look out," he cried. "There goes Rawson off the stoop! Watch out fer him!"

Ray pulled the warp out of his shoulders and looked at Ollie then and it was that quick contact of their eyes—as revealing as speech could be—that gave Ray the answer he had to have. He knew in that heartbeat of time what he must do.

"All right," he said, "I'll take your horse and hit for the Broken Buttes. Look for me at the old line shack on Rumbling Creek!"

Ollie reached out and shoved at

Ray, a wildness on his blunt-shaped face and in his rounded eyes. "Sure —sure! Go on! Go on!"

Ray stepped out and over the high plank walk, dropping to the dust beyond and heading rapidly toward the mouth of a small alley across the way. After a yard or two, he slowed his pace, not wishing to seem in a hurry. On the yonder walk, he stopped, head turned, sweeping the street with harried eyes. Standing there exposed to view, he felt a stab of bitterness; and that tense moment of waiting was drawn out interminably so that it held all he had ever feared or hidden from. It held, fiery and sharpened by fury, all the hatred and suspicion which separated homesteaders from cattlemen—it held for him nothing but anger and distrust and fear.

He was aware, suddenly, that the crowd was moving toward him now. The flurry of distant voices lifted to a clamorous uproar. Riders, swinging lass ropes, milled recklessly through the throng, sending the street's dust high as they reared and bucked. Ray turned abruptly and ducked down the alleyway, not toward the lot where his mules and rig were tied but toward the spot in the rear of the blacksmith shop where Ollie had left his horse.

In the saddle finally, Ray flogged the claybank down along the rim of the livery's corral, sent the horse by one back street after another to the safety of the sage flats west of town. And the trail he followed now carried him southwestward toward the far-off line of mountain peaks whose first straggling foothills lay forty miles from River Bend.

Near five o'clock that afternoon the horse brought Ray to these foothills and began the gradual climb toward the wild region under the escarpment. Ray stopped to blow his mount in a stand of gaunt jackpines. Throughout the long ride he had thought constantly of his situation; and he had considered Ollie Young's final instructions and advice which the nester had delivered at the last moment in town.

"Leave everything to me," Ollie had said. "I'll drive your rig back to your place and lay low for a day or two. When I see what happens, I'll ride out to your line shack with some grub and your rifle and blanket roll. One thing's sure—we got to watch Rawson and the Hat boys and John Tammany. If they track yuh down they'd skin your hide and hang it up to dry . . ."

It occurred to Ray that the days to come held little but danger and suspense for him. And now the warm feeling he had always had for Ollie Young increased. For—and he freely admitted it—without Ollie's loyalty he would be confronted with disaster final and complete. All he possessed in the world was tied up in his farm and stock at Salty Ford; and if he had to leave it all and run for it, he'd be nothing but a saddle bum or, worse, a fugitive.

But who *had* killed Sam Lockerbie? Lud Rawson? John Tammany? Harry Duff or Bill Dowd? And, if Tammany was not guilty, why had

he— Ray cursed his own slow-wittedness. Tammany could not have murdered the old rancher, for Ray's own alibi was paradoxically John Tammany's as well! That left Lud Rawson or one of the Hat crew. Unless one of the Salt Flats homesteaders had murdered the old man to circumvent Lockerbie's grim plan to dispossess the farmers on the Indigo Strip. And this small group embraced Widmer, Young, Callahan and the Witherspoon brothers.

Why, then, had Tammany denied the delivery of the corral rails by Ray and the twenty-dollar payment? Ray thought of the theft of Lockerbie's Navajo blanket, and of the one he had placed on the straw-stack seat of his wagon that morning. It could, as a matter of fact, be true that both saddle blankets were similar in color and design; but they could not, Ray knew, be identical. It was a fact admitted by most people that no two Navajos could be the same in all respects. In this case there was another consideration. The blanket owned by Lockerbie was well-known and a valuable one; it was very old, woven from *bayeta* native-dyed wool, while Ray's was ordinary, loomed from plain cheap Germantown yarn, brightly colored but comparatively valueless, except for its sentimental worth.

Ray had the thought that he or Ollie would have to find Lockerbie's *bayeta* saddle blanket or at least prove Ray's was not genuine. On the other hand, he, Ray, had the likeliest motive for killing the old man, although others, too, would appear to profit to a greater or less degree by Lockerbie's sudden death. As obscure as it seemed Ray felt that with time and opportunity he would be able to clear himself. But at this moment he possessed no clue, no hint, except John Tammany's attitude, and Sam Lockerbie's note which Lud Rawson had delivered at the farm the day before and which he now had committed to memory:

Trask:

If you wish to learn something of concern to yourself and others on the Strip, drive out to my place as soon as you can.

Sam Lockerbie.

Sitting slack and weary on Ollie's claybank, Ray stared bleakly back over the trail toward the vague blue distance and River Bend. This was his bad moment, for hope and self-assurance were at low ebb, and loneliness was crawling over him. Finally, however, he lifted the bridle reins and turned the horse, moving it onward at a slower pace into the high hard-rock country toward the cabin above Rumbling Creek.

III

Ray reached the deserted line shack high up in the shouldering mountains at dusk that afternoon. The cabin, made of unpeeled logs, sat in a sunless clearing shadowed by the peaks, and second-growth pine pointed its reaching fingers skyward among stumps left when the shack had been built. Twenty yards behind the cabin was a log corral with trees in it from which the branches had been cut.

The small one-roomed shack had

a sod roof, weed-grown and weighted down with weather-polished stones. It smelled dank and musty from being closed, and it was very dark. Ray tore the burlap off the two small windows. A pine table was in the center of the room; an old sheet-iron stove stood at one end and the wood bin was empty. Three rickety chairs stood at the table. Against one wall were two rough bunks with broken slats and musty-smelling ticks. There were two candles—one stuck in a broken and up-ended bottle on the table, the other shoved into a knot hole of a shelf above the stove.

With the horse unsaddled and turned into the corral, Ray made a fire and sat before it, warming his hands. It was cold up here in the *mountains when the sun went down.* Supperless, he crawled into the lower bunk when it got full dark, covering himself with the claybank's saddle blanket.

At sundown of the second day Ollie Young came up the trail and into the clearing on a jaded chestnut pony taken from Ray's corrals. Ray received him like a brother, overwhelmed by a mixture of emotions. The first thing Ollie said when he dismounted was: "Ray, it shore looks bad. Rawson and his rowdies rode out to your place last night and tore your house to hell! They was lookin' fer Lockerbie's missin' money and his papers and when they didn't find them, they jest busted things up like a bunch of Injuns on a drunk!"

Ray heard him out implacably. He was torn by a sense of helplessness, of rage and uncertainty, yet so glad that Ollie had kept his word and had come here that he could have danced. Ollie had brought his, Ray's, Navajo blanket—the one he had been forced to leave in the wagon in town when he had fled—his repeating rifle and a good-sized sack of grub. While he unpacked it from the saddle of the chestnut, Ollie said, out of a clear sky:

"John Tammany let it out last night that he's got Sam Lockerbie's last will and testament and that the old man's done gone and left the ranch and everything to Lud Rawson."

Ray jumped and stared. When finally he found the words, he gasped: "Ollie, that does it! Lud Rawson killed Lockerbie as sure as tomorrow!"

Ollie turned his head, his pale eyes, beneath sorrel-colored brows, vague and unconvinced. "Well, I wouldn't say that proved it. But I dunno . . . it's too durned mixed up fer me to figure out. I—"

Excitement flamed in Ray's eyes. "Why, it's as plain as plowed ground, Ollie! Rawson saw his chance to murder the old man ahead of time and saddle it on me! He was the one brought Sam's note to me and he must've knowed what was in it! He'd never've got a better break than that!"

"I don't see how you're goin' to prove that," Ollie drawled doubtfully. "And there's John Tammany. Why'd he make a liar out o' you and—"

"Tammany's in it, too," Ray said,

anger tightening his lean jaw. "What for, I don't savvy yet. Unless—"

"Too many maybes," Ollie opined glumly. "You'll have to leave things to me, Ray. Hole up here for a while and I'll snoop around. Marshal Jim Blaine's got a posse out scratchin' the hills and Rawson's been raisin' partic'lar hell because Blaine ain't cut your sign yet."

Ray reluctantly agreed. Nevertheless, he stated flatly, grimly, that if something didn't happen within a week he would ride back to the Flats and take his chances on getting caught. "I'd like to search Hat Ranch for one thing," he said. "That's where this is goin' to break, I'm certain of it. There's the old man's *bayeta* blanket that ain't been found—and Lockerbie's private papers, the mortgage on the Strip. They've been stached somewheres, and I'm bettin' they're right there at Hat Ranch!"

Ray fried bacon and heated a can of beans and both men sat down by candlelight to eat. It was Ray's first meal in forty-eight hours and he devoured the food with an endless appetite. Wood snapped in the stove; otherwise there was silence and the faint "swish" of the pines outside.

Ray was reaching out for the coffeepot when the gun went off. He jerked his head around toward the window on his right, flinging the pot down hard. For a long tense moment the silence of slightly deafened ears held the cabin. The bullet which had knifed the air an inch from Ray's head slammed into the log wall in back of him, and now a bluish halo of gunsmoke began to spread out in a lazy drift above the candle on the table.

Ollie Young's dead-white face swam into Roy's line of vision then, and the nester's mouth was twisted into the shape of a crooked letter "O" as he ducked head first toward the floor. Ray struck backhandedly at the candle at the same instant, knocking it off the table, and followed Ollie to the floor, hitting with a thud on his hands and knees. The candle was out, and both men were in deep shadows, but the blow of the red-hot stove lids was behind them and the sputtering flame of the other candle was on the shelf above.

Ollie had his red head pulled down as if he were trying to bury it in the hard-packed floor. Ray's revolver and belt hung on one of the bunks at the opposite end of the room. The man who had fired that shot might not know that, but he undoubtedly knew there were two men here, and perhaps was waiting out there in the dark for one or both to break out of the cabin, perhaps was watching with cat eyes through the window now.

Ray rubbed the sweat off his palms against his jeans, still crouched low, still listening. He wanted his hands dry when he got his gun. And he wanted darkness. As long as there was one spot of light in the cabin, the watcher at the window—if still there—would have them both cross-ripped with his fire. Ray drew out his bandanna, wadded it loosely in

his hand, reached back and tossed it. The bandanna spread out a little and fell directly across the candle on the shelf, whiffing it out.

Then Ray sprang up and ran through the blackness, groped over the bunk, found the belt, moved his hand to the holster and drew the gun. Things were more even now, and he waited for a revealing sound. Nothing happened. Only Ollie's ragged breathing disturbed the eerie quiet. Ray felt like an animal trapped in his own hole. He moved to the door, walked cat-footed through it into the yard. A sound reached him, and he jumped back into the door opening before he realized the sound was the clatter of horses' hoofs receding down the trail. He counted two horses; and now he was sure that the man who had fired the shot and missed, had ridden off to join a companion in the canyon to the east.

Ray went back into the cabin, trying to add up the facts that seemed sure; the first was that the killer knew the lay of the land hereabouts, although perhaps he and his pard had trailed Ollie Young up here. The second was that it couldn't have been Marshal Blaine or any of his men. All this slowly added up to something, and Ray didn't like the answer. Now, fumbling for the candle he had knocked to the floor, he heard Ollie Young say: "Jumpin' catfish, Ray, I'm goin' to drag it fer home! That was too close fer me, brother!"

Ray tacitly agreed; and the nester cautioned him vigorously: "Better keep an eye peeled—I'll be back day after tomorrow."

A few minutes afterward Ollie had hit the saddle and was riding off into the darkness.

Ray sat by the stove all night with the shutters hooked and sullenly hated himself for a feeling that seemed cowardly. He couldn't believe that the killer would come back, but he couldn't be sure he wouldn't, either.

Dawn was late and when he finally went outside he saw why. The mountain air was damply like rain though there were no storm clouds in the turquoise sky. He began his search for the killer's tracks but could find nothing he could be sure of, except that there *had* been two horsemen, and both had headed back into the plain to the east.

At ten that morning Ray stopped for a quick meal of cold beans and coffee. During the past hours his mind had turned incessantly around the thought of riding back to the Flats—even to Hat Ranch. It was a risky thing to consider, but he couldn't endure any more of this bootless waiting.

Ray studied every angle of danger, and, at noon, came to his decision. Without further delay he got his Navajo saddle blanket off the bunk, saddled and cinched up, mounted and turned the claybank down the canyon trail.

The miles drifted to the rear: long stretches of prairie, timbered hills, little gravelly streams. At six o'clock

that afternoon the horse brought Ray in sight of the Canadian River. The trail he now followed carried him finally through a region of pine forest and, when they topped a high ridge, a mile east of the river, Ray saw Hat's ranch quarters lying ahead in the mottled shade and sunlight of a grove of trees—the long, low house, the bunkhouse and corrals and sheds spread around it.

The ranch appeared deserted; there was no sound save the petulant blatting of some calves lying in the nearby calf corral. Sundown was near, and now, suddenly, an east wind came up with a faint suggestion of chill. Halted in the hemming chaparral, Ray settled down to watch the yard with his alert keen eyes. A horse nickered somewhere near, and the shrill echo struck out and onward through the land's great stillness.

After ten minutes, Ray was satisfied that Rawson and his men were away from the ranch, and he moved the claybank out of the brush and into the hard-packed yard. He drew up at the corral water trough and dismounted, standing motionless and erect, staring, listening.

He was like this, facing the corral with the drab wall of the big hay barn at his back, when boots scuffed abruptly behind him. He started to turn, started to draw his gun. Even as the revolver butt struck him behind the ear, he tried to turn. Blinding white light exploded in his brain, then faded, and he dropped swiftly into bottomless black. . . .

IV

Ray fought his way back to consciousness, moving queerly up through vague shifting sensations of light and sound. Then he felt pain, quick and steady and punishing, in his head; even his body throbbed in sympathy. Light burst before his eyes; his sight focused gradually. He looked beyond the light and discovered the huge bulk of Bill Dowd, a Hat puncher, squatting cumbersomely on a chair in the corner of a room. Dowd was motionless, a cigarette stuck damply to his bulging under lip, his red-rimmed eyes round and gray and empty.

Ray stirred, at once finding himself on a bunk, with the bare slats of another above his head. Men's voices set up an odd rumble out in the yard. He distinguished Lud Rawson's heavy voice: "Harry, ride to town for Marshal Blaine and bring him out here on the hop. I'm goin' after John Tammany." Afterward, Ray heard riders leave the ranch yard in one long, running column.

On his chair, Bill Dowd came to life. He looked up at Ray, saying in a stupid, chanting tone: "We got yuh, Trask—we got yuh good, by grab!"

Ray sat up and threw his legs over the edge of the bunk. His head hurt; suddenly he felt very ill. When he rubbed a hand behind his ear, his fingers caught the huge lump. He licked dry lips, aware that his gun belt had been stripped off. His illness gave way to a feeling of deep and burning chagrin. He dropped

his chin in elbow-propped hands and watched his guard out of hooded eyes.

"What about a drink of water, Bill?" he said, at last.

The puncher stood up, awkward and towering, a slow-witted giant, all hands and feet and gangling, loose-limbed frame. "No water," he said thickly. "No nuthin'."

Ray got up, stretching to take the warp out of his shoulders. He stood erect, feeling a little dizzy yet, a little sick. He drew out his tobacco and slowly built himself a cigarette. When it was lighted and drawing good, he looked at Dowd and said: "A hell of a way to use a man! Get me a drink."

Dowd studied that with a ponderous effort at thought. "All right," he finally agreed, and went shambling out of the bunkhouse into the yard. His voice came back: "Don't try and run. Yuh won't git fur."

Smoking slowly, Ray examined the bunkhouse, at first seeing nothing he could use as a weapon. Presently he heard a rider come into the yard at a fast clip, heard Bill Dowd's loud voice say: "Where the devil you been? Rawson's on the prod fer fair!"

The answering voice was vaguely familiar, but too soft to be identified. Probably another one of the Hat crew who had remained in town too long. Still smoking, Ray let his thoughts move deliberately over his chances for escape. In half an hour at most Lud Rawson would be riding in with Lawyer Tammany, and Marshal Blaine would also arrive about that time.

Dowd was still outside talking to the new arrival. That made two men instead of one Ray would have to jump if he tried to make a break. There was about twenty minutes of daylight left, then darkness would engulf the ranch. But could he afford to wait that long?

Now he quickly reconstructed Hat's yard in his mind. It was a good ten-yard run from the bunkhouse where he was now, to the corrals—fifty feet further to the underbrush; a fast and risky run without a horse. And his horse was out of it now. Then Dowd's voice cut violently across his thoughts.

"Git over by the bunk, Trask. I'll put the water on the table."

Ray backed toward the bunk, seeing the big man roll in with a tin can of water which he placed carefully on the table beside the lamp. Dowd lit the lamp and stepped back to the wall near the door with his vast shoulders pressing the plaster. Ray moved to the table, and took his drink, not pausing even to get his breath. It was a reviving draft.

"You killed the old man," Dowd proclaimed in a bearlike growl. "Shot him in the back. I oughta break your neck and tell Rawson yuh tried to run fer it."

"So?" Ray put the tin can on the table and stood with his hands out flat on the pine. "Well, I never killed your boss," he pointed out. "Lud Rawson did that."

Dodd was nursing his violent thoughts, turning them over in his slow mind. He stood, bent slightly forward now, nothing restraining the desire to maim and destroy but some thin tether of uncertainty, which he was trying to break.

"*You* killed Sam," he said. "Lud says yuh did."

Ray stood over the table, stooped a bit but not much, and now, slowly, very slowly, he let his right hand slide toward the lighted lamp. The yellow glow against his face made his jaw and the lines at his mouth look grim and deeply scored. There was this moment of silence, and then he lifted the lamp to shoulder height and flung it at Bill Dowd with all his might.

The big man went pop-eyed and tried to duck, but the lamp crashed the wall a foot above his head and showered him with blazing oil and broken glass. His wild howl split the room and he flung himself toward the door, blocking it from side to side, frantically beating at the flames with his bare hands.

Ray dropped his hands and flung the table over as Dowd made his jump. Tripped at the knees by the table, the big man crashed down. Ray drove through the tangle of table legs, plunging recklessly toward the door. But Dowd was on his feet with astonishing agility; and he came at Ray through the flickering light in one tremendous rush. He missed the mark, however, as Ray side-dodged, and Dowd went on and shook the bunkhouse as he struck the wall with a heavy crash.

The blazing oil had flared suddenly into full fire leaping up the wall—it illumined the room with an eerie, bluish glow. Dowd turned ponderously and rushed again at Ray who was near the door. Hearing the puncher clattering toward him, Ray wheeled in time and ducked aside, jumping the capsized table. He seized a chair and whipped himself around.

Fire licked along the wall, and the pine plank floor began to snap. One runner of flame raced over the floor following the oil stain and caught with a small explosion on a dry straw tick of a lower bunk. Heat swelled in the room and smoke flowed, sluggish and tar-black.

Ray brought the chair down in one circling slashing swoop and hit Dowd across the side of the head as the puncher closed in at the end of his blind rush. Dowd's weight carried him onward and he collided with Ray and both men went down, rolling. Fighting free, Ray smelled scorched hair; he stood up and grabbed Dowd by one leg, hauling him away from the flames, then on out through the door into the ranch yard. The puncher lay still, all the fight knocked out of him.

It was now full dark, with the flames inside the bunkhouse spreading a thin glow in the night; and it was by this faint, flickering light that Ray spotted the man over near the wide-open door of the hay barn, a hundred feet away. As Ray stared, excitement whipping along his nerves,

the man jumped backward through the door.

Ray turned Bill Dowd over and, reaching down, unbuckled his gun belt. He strapped it on, then he wheeled and ran toward the barn, reaching it and sliding along the wall, the gun out and held flat against his side. He cocked it deliberately, then stood still, waiting, listening. And now the whole night was filled with the crackle of the fire; the bunkhouse door and windows were crimson with flame; sparks exploded like pistol shots through the roof, swirling upward into the black vault of the sky.

Suddenly, and he heard it plainly, boots pounded overhead in the barn's high loft. Ray pulled back, gun gripped tightly, preparedly, as he watched the barn's doorway. In that swift moment of tension he had no way of telling who the man in the loft could be, but he guessed it was foe, not friend. And then, with a rush of boots, the man broke out into the yard. The light was too vague, too erratic, for Ray to see the man's face, but he lifted his gun and called: "Stand still or I'll gun you down!"

The man was carrying a bulky object which occupied both hands. But as Ray's voice cracked out, the man stumbled and nearly fell. He caught himself with an effort and rushed on, going full tilt toward the underbrush that rimmed the yard. Ray held his fire, yelling: "Halt!"

That was the exact moment that hoof thunder poured down into the yard, and the ground boiled with oncoming riders, and the hard, quick shouts of men broke into the trees and ran out across the corrals and echoed on through the hillside. Ray saw faces, grim and bronzed, in the light of the blazing bunkhouse; and he saw the man with the bundle still sprinting for the brush. Then gunfire burst through the night, the steady round claps of sound rising and swelling until there was no other noise in all the world.

Standing there with his back to the barn, Ray saw the man with the bundle check his stride, then go on with a queer stringhalt gait for a few feet when he stumbled to his knees, arms flung wide, the bundle flying clear. The man collapsed against the dust and did not move again. After that Ray could not be sure what happened. The racket of hoofs and yells wiped out all other sound.

Riders pounded across the yard and stopped, dropping from saddles, wide hats flapping, faces stern and dust-covered, rifles glittering, holstered revolvers slapping lean thighs. Marshal Jim Blaine dismounted heavily, his ruddy face streaked with sweat, and swung toward Ray. Harry Duff, Dick Shorey and Pete Merke were in that ruck of mounted men; and John Tammany was sitting arrogantly on a big dun horse, staring tightly at the man backed up to the barn like an animal at bay.

It was a shifting panorama of sweating men and horses, of sardonic faces seen through a haze of smoke and dust and the hard glare of the burning bunkhouse. Now Marshal

Blaine was yelling out: "Who's that over there on the ground?"

And Pete Merke's voice came whipping back: "Why, damn my hide, it's Ollie Young! Somebuddy's gunned him—he's hard hit!"

Ray stiffened, staring out across the yard to the spot where Ollie lay so still. He felt a welter of emotions but astonishment overlaid them all. He had come near to shooting his friend in the back! But what was Ollie doing here at Hat?

"Lud—Lud!" Dick Shorey yelled. "Come here! Ollie had Lockerbie's saddle blanket! He was tryin' to git away with it!"

Now riders were running toward the man on the ground. And other voices began to shout. Harry Duff said: "Lud, here's all Sam's papers—the money, too!"

Suddenly—it came like the rumble of a storm—hoofs pounded down into the yard. More horsemen boiled off the ridge and their shouts mingled with the cries of Hat and the yells of the marshal's men. Ray saw a score of Salt Creek homesteaders rush in, rifles and revolvers readied for firing; and he knew that Darrel Widmer and Frank Callahan had brought men here to Hat to force Lud Rawson into the open with his threats of war. Ray saw the black weave of shapes in the yard, the dizzy whirl of milling mounts. Then he heard the marshal's warning cry. Almost instantaneously that shout took the drive out of Widmer's men, and all the uproar faded down, and nesters and cattlemen were standing in the dust, all staring at one man: the wounded Ollie Young who lay so still, so silent, on the ground.

V

The crowd had jammed into the big-beamed living room of Sam Lockerbie's Hat Ranch—as many, that is, as could get in past the deputy posted at the gallery door. Lud Rawson, sullen and cold-eyed, stood backed up to the fireplace, hands locked behind his back as he teetered on toe and heel, watching Ray Trask who stood next to Marshal Blaine across the room. There was a suggestion of uncertainty in Rawson's stance and on his wedge-shaped face. He looked like a man waiting for a signal, but not daring to make a move until it came.

John Tammany remained a stiff, unmoved shape over by the room's rear door. Tall and gaunt in his long-tailed coat and white shirt front, the lawyer was watching Lud Rawson over the heads of a dozen staring men. Ray saw all this, saw the hate and suspicion on the grim faces of the Hat boys, the doubt on those of the homesteaders.

Marshal Blaine spoke: "Ollie Young's a goner. The doc's out there and one of my boys is takin' Ollie's statement down. Meantime, while we're waitin', I ask everybuddy here to stay where he is till I tell him he c'n leave."

Stern and gray of face, Darrel Widmer looked at Ray and said in a wrathful voice: "We'll be right pleased to see you hang! All this

could've ended in bloodshed and killin' from what you done!"

Ray tightened his mouth, his eyes, and took the nester leader's stare unflinchingly. "You're standin' 'round here primed to hang an innocent man," he said. "A fine bunch!"

"Innocent, hell!" somebody snapped.

Muttering filled the room with a murmurous sound. Outside, voices could be heard faintly above the crackle of the burning bunkhouse. Ray rolled a cigarette with steady hands, watching all those vindictive faces. The marshal struck a match for him, and Ray said "Thanks." As he leaned to the flame, he saw Deputy Tom Hesson come in past the guard at the door. Hesson walked up to the marshal and handed him a letter and a sheet of paper with writing on it. Hesson whispered something in Blaine's ear and the marshal looked up and said: "Ollie's dead." That was all.

There was a moment of silence like the quiet before the breaking of a storm. Then growling voices began to lift. Blaine quelled it with his own deep voice: "I'm goin' to read this letter from Sam Lockerbie that was in the papers and money Ollie had. Now everybody keep quiet till I'm through." He spread the letter in a hamlike hand, began:

"Ray Trask:

I'm writing this to play it safe. I've got a hunch I won't live long and I want to make amends for some of the things I've done. You told me off the other day and I admired your guts. Maybe I am an old 'skinflint' like you said. But I know what hard luck is, too. This note is in case you don't get the one I sent Rawson with. In case I die by violence, I hereby appoint you, Ray Trask, trustee of my estate. All my holdings are to be sold at public auction and the proceeds divided equally with you and the homesteaders of Salt Creek Flats.

Sam Lockerbie."

When the marshal finished, he looked up, peering at the crowd, at Lud Rawson, at John Tammany. It was Rawson who blurted out angrily: "That don't mean anything, Blaine! Trask prob'ly wanted the old man out of the way!"

John Tammany added his words in a cold, implacable tone: "That letter won't hold water in a court of law. Besides, it may be a forgery."

"It was in that Navajo blanket of Sam's," the marshal flatly said. "Trask certainly didn't hide it there."

Ray pinned his tight eyes on Tammany's stolid face. "You're a black-hearted liar! You know I couldn't have killed Sam Lockerbie!"

Lud Rawson broke in impatiently: "We saw that blanket on the seat of Trask's wagon that day in town. That proves—"

Deputy Hesson cut him off in his curt voice: "We found Trask's Navajo blanket under his saddle just now. It's got the same stair design on it in red and black and white but it ain't a real *bayeta*, and Lockerbie's was. We tested them. The lint on Lockerbie's burns—Trask's don't burn at all!"

Now Marshal Blaine commanded

the crowded room with his big booming voice: "That's enough of that. Now I'll read Ollie's dyin' statement." He tipped the paper toward the light and solemnly read:

"I killed Sam Lockerbie. Lud Rawson and John Tammany hired me to stir up the nesters against the old man, but mostly they wanted me to get Ray Trask riled up enough to threaten Lockerbie. I went to see Lockerbie the day he died and I knew then about the fake will Tammany had drawn up leaving the ranch to Lud."

The marshal paused in his reading to spear a glance at Rawson and Tammany. Both men took his stare without a blink. Blaine went on reading, now in a louder tone:

"But Tammany was trying to double-cross Rawson. He even offered to pay me five hundred dollars if I'd get Lud out of the way for him, but I figured I could get more cash out of Lockerbie and maybe clear title to my land so when I went to see the old man that day, I told him what Rawson and Tammany were up to. But Lockerbie called me a liar and threw me out of his office. I shot him when he turned his back on me, and I took the Navajo blanket off the wall to wrap the papers and mortgages and money in, and I hid the stuff in the Hat barn planning to get it later on. I thought I was safe when I got Trask to cut and run, but got scared when Rawson followed me to Rumbling Creek and almost shot me instead of Trask. That's all and I'm plumb sorry for what I done.

Signed

Ollie Young."

Marshal Blaine finished reading the dead nester's confession on a queer hushed note. But it was Lud Rawson's voice that rang out harshly on all that quiet. "It's a lie! You cooked that up to get me hanged!" He stood before the fireplace, tall and slightly stooped, with his neck outthrust, his squarish face congested and black with blood. He was very still, and suddenly his hard bright eyes went to the white face of John Tammany across the room. "You damned rat!" he said venomously.

The silence drew out interminably, unbearably. Then Rawson's shoulders flexed forward; his arms came up. Ten paces separated him from the lawyer and Rawson had Tammany pinned against the wall with his furious, accusing eyes.

The crowd melted back against the wall, staring, open-mouthed, helpless before this show of maniacal rage. Even Blaine and Hesson and Ray Trask stood petrified. But Tammany's pale eyes thrust cold passion back at Rawson and he did not move or speak. His big pistol showed on his hip, protruding from beneath the skirt of his long black coat.

Then, in a split second, in a fraction of time so short it could not be measured, Rawson snatched at his own weapon, but even as his hand darted down across his thick body, Tammany's hand streaked too. The lawyer fired with his left hand, not his right. He was shooting a tiny blue-steel pistol that had been concealed in his sleeve, and not the visible gun that swung at his hip.

The bullet from the lawyer's gun caught Rawson squarely on the top

button hole of his cowhide vest; it staggered the foreman back a pace.. Tammany's eyes were hot and filled with a searing hate.

Breath knocked out of him, Lud Rawson swayed, but slowly kept pulling his six-gun up. He called on all his will, on all his strength, even as he tottered there dragging his toes along the floor, even as he fell. His finger pressed the trigger once—twice. Both men struck the floor together and neither stirred again.

Now the crowd was pushing out of the Hat living room. The rank taint of gunsmoke still clung to the hot and heavy air, and the smell of death still stayed long after they had carried the bodies of the two cronies out. Only Marshal Blaine, Darrel Widmer and Frank Callahan remained with Ray, and Ray said very little after telling them: "I never figured Ollie was the killer of Old Sam. It don't seem possible. Why, Ollie was my friend. I helped him many's the time—and he helped me." He shook his head dejectedly. "It just goes to show you can't never tell about a man."

The marshal studied Ray with his shrewd gray eyes, bright now beneath an awning of salt-white brows. "Yuh trusted Ollie and he played on that to save his own damn neck. Too bad Sam Lockerbie had to die. He was a pioneer, a tough un but plenty square."

Darrel Widmer, looking almost pleasant now, spoke up: "We done yuh wrong, Ray. I hope yuh won't hold it agin' us too much."

Ray met his eyes. "It looked bad for me," he admitted, "when Tammany refused to back me about those basswood poles."

"'Twas a close shave," said Callahan thankfully. "There might've been a fight here to beat the Lincoln County wars back home."

Blaine said thoughtfully: "The way it was, neither Rawson or Tammany figured Ollie'd kill the old man ahead o' time. And they didn't savvy what that note Rawson brought to you meant. Way it was, they figured you *had* killed Sam and stole the Navajo and the papers and the money. 'Twas lucky they thought thataway. I saw Lud Rawson fire the shot that finished Ollie Young a while ago. And when Lud killed Ollie, he licked himself!" The marshal tipped his hat back on his iron-gray head and looked at his watch, adding soberly: "That was a smart little chore yuh done, Ray, when yuh took a chance and rode over here to Hat."

Ray shrugged it off. "Well, there's good times comin'—thanks to Sam Lockerbie, rest his soul. And, speakin' of chores, marshal, I'm headin' home to do a few. Ain't fed my chickens in three days. They've prob'ly et my garden up." He turned toward the door, a tall man, not big, but stocky and resolute. "Come on, you antelopes," he grinned. "Let's ride!"

THE END

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